

Complete Streets

Streets should be designed and maintained to meet all our needs. Whether you walk, bike, roll, drive or use public transit, we all deserve streets that are safe. Tragically, people in the United States are struck and killed, maimed, and seriously injured by vehicles on unsafe streets at alarming rates. All people from all neighborhoods should have access to Complete Streets that help them get where they need to go, live, play, and grow.

The Street Design Challenge

- Rates of pedestrian fatalities have increased sharply in the last fifteen years, including a rise of 77% from 2010 to 2021.¹ In 2023, approximately 7,300 people nationwide were struck and killed by motor vehicles, an average of 20 people per day.¹
- Current transportation planning caters to motor vehicles and those who have access to them, while simultaneously failing to make the surrounding streets safe and efficient enough for other modes of transit.²
- Multiple studies utilizing traffic data have found that pedestrian fatalities are more likely to occur in low-income and/or historically marginalized communities.³⁻⁵
- A longitudinal study of 80 miles of sidewalk in Michigan from 2016-2018 showed that low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods that have a higher proportion of Black and Latinx residents have overall worse sidewalk quality.⁶

A Healthy Solution: Complete Streets

Complete Streets can improve public health more broadly by shifting design priorities from a sole focus on motor vehicles to reducing traffic congestion and making physical modes of transportation, like walking and biking, safer and more accessible.

- **Provide city residents safe routes in their communities** – Complete Streets policies can help address dangerous intersections and disparities in traffic fatalities and can help the most vulnerable people who use the streets, such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities or those without access to a car.⁷
- **Address increased public demand for active transportation infrastructure** – Interest in alternative modes of transportation, such as walking or biking, increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and has not subsided.^{8,9}

- **Provide health and safety benefits for pedestrians, bicyclists and drivers** – Complete Streets encourage and enable active transportation, such as cycling and walking,¹⁰ which promotes physical activity, and reduces pedestrian-involved crashes.¹¹

What is the Evidence that Complete Streets Policies Can Improve Health?

Complete Streets policies have resulted in health and safety benefits for pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicle drivers.¹⁰ They encourage and enable active transportation like cycling and walking, and multiple studies have associated moderate activity levels with decreases in health challenges such as obesity and cardiovascular diseases.^{12,13}

- Increased physical activity is associated with improved mental health,¹²⁻¹⁴ meaning access to safe, walkable streets is good for both body and mind.¹⁵
- Diversified and streamlined transportation not only allows more people to navigate their cities safely, but can also reduce noise pollution, and traffic congestion.¹⁶ A 2015 case study on the implementation of Complete Streets projects in the U.S. identified reduced congestion and noise pollution as potential benefits of Complete Streets.¹⁶
- Adding Complete Streets features can reduce traffic-related crashes by up to 90%.
 - Sidewalks increase connectivity within a community and can reduce pedestrian-involved crashes by nearly 90%.¹¹
 - Adding a bicycle lane can reduce the number of crashes on certain roads by nearly 50%.¹⁷
 - Replacing a stop sign or traffic signal intersection with a roundabout can reduce fatal and incapacitating injury crashes by 90%.¹⁸
 - Improving lighting at intersections can reduce nighttime injury crashes by over 40%.¹⁹
- Complete Streets policies are recommended by entities like the CDC and the U.S. Department of Transportation due to evidence indicating they can improve safety and mobility.^{20,21}

How Can Complete Streets Help Address Health Disparities?

Current transportation planning caters to motor vehicles and those that have access to them, while simultaneously failing to make the surrounding streets safe and efficient enough for other modes of transit.² Complete Streets policies help address these inequities by shifting the focus of the built environment to include low-income and racial minority neighborhoods that are more likely to lack elements of safe streets.

- An audit of streets of different walkability levels pre- and post-renovation in Salt Lake City UT showed that Complete Streets could increase the proportions of women that utilize public streets, leading to physical activity benefits across genders.²²
- The addition of public transportation, sidewalks, and bike lanes that facilitate active transportation and community connectivity would most benefit the marginalized communities that suffer the most from the current designs.^{4,6,15}
- Reductions in pedestrian deaths and traffic fatalities would protect those in low-income or racial minority neighborhoods where crash rates are highest.³⁻⁵
- A qualitative study on the City of Tucson found that persistent, intentional efforts to both engage the community and focus decision-making on the priorities of marginalized communities during the policy development process was critical to achieving equity in Complete Streets policies.²³

What Are Some Future Issues to Consider?

Complete Streets policies are multi-part plans executed over months and years as construction projects progress. While there is strong evidence for the benefits of these policies in the long term, residents may feel unsatisfied in the short term if they think that changes are not happening quickly enough or at all. It is also worth noting that the addition of some features like bike lanes are not always welcome.²⁴

Jurisdictions adopting or updating Complete Streets policies may also want to take the distribution and location of changes into consideration during implementation. The strongest Complete Streets policies clearly prioritize vulnerable users such as the disabled community, the elderly, or historically disinvested neighborhoods. Policies that do so are the best positioned to address health disparities.

Resources for Cities

[Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center](#)- A resource center that guides agencies and individuals in designing walkable and bikeable streets.

[HRGreen](#)- An article that highlights the sustainability of Complete Streets.

[A Community of Transportation Professionals](#) - A guide listing publications on Complete Streets resources.

[Smart Growth America](#)- Best Complete Streets Policies 2025

[Smart Growth America](#) – Complete Streets Policy Framework

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