

STEPPING OFF THE CURB *and Into the Sunshine*

A Look at Florida's Pedestrian Safety Problem

by Stephen Benson

In recent years, the Sunshine State bore the brunt of national criticism regarding roadway safety due to our alarming record of pedestrian fatalities. While it's true that we carry the highest pedestrian fatality rate when compared to our population, headlines seem to ignore the fact that this pedestrian safety problem is not unique to Florida. According to the 2011 'Dangerous by Design' report released by Transportation for America, 9 of the top 10 states with the highest pedestrian fatality rates are "Sun Belt" states. The superficial response to this statement is that our beautiful, mild climate is the cause; sunshine and flat terrain promotes recreational demand and increases pedestrian activity. However, while mild climate certainly influences the lifestyles of this region, this conclusion falsely implies that nothing else can be done to improve pedestrian safety. Indeed pedestrian activity is influenced more by culture and the built environment than by the weather. This explains why densely populated northern cities like Seattle, New York, Boston and the District of Columbia have some of the nation's highest walking, biking, and transit-riding populations, despite their harsh winters and challenging topography. Since pedestrian activity is high, it's not a surprise that these denser urban centers experience more annual pedestrian fatality counts. But when population is factored into the equation, northern cities fare from low to about average in pedestrian fatality rates, and southern cities and states jump to the top of the list. The real curiosity comes when you consider that even the largest metro areas in the South – Los Angeles, Houston, Phoenix, Atlanta, Miami – are still largely suburban in nature and thus dominated by automobile travelers. This begs the question, how is it that states with relatively low pedestrian activity generate higher pedestrian fatality rates when normalized by population?

The answer lies in the built environment and its impact on mobility.

The complex pattern is more evident when approached from a macro perspective. The pedestrian fatality problem can be traced to three primary trends: overwhelming levels of (suburban) growth since the 1960s, large communities of economically disadvantaged citizens with lower educational attainment, and higher proportions of transportation disadvantaged persons (children and the elderly). These land use and socio-economic conditions heavily influence the transportation system – and directly impact pedestrian safety issues.

The vast majority of growth in the South since 1960 has been typically suburban in nature – characterized by an intentional separation of land uses and hierarchical street systems with low connectivity and wide 6-lane (or more) arterial roadways. This type of built environment is simply not conducive to pedestrian travel because walking distances are much farther and wide roadways are more challenging for pedestrians to safely cross. Very often, pedestrians choose to cross mid-block simply because it is easier to evaluate fewer automobile movements at once. Major arterial intersections may be built precisely to engineering standards and possess upgraded pedestrian features, but if a pedestrian feels intimidated by an intersection they will choose to cross elsewhere. Suffice it to say that transportation disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged populations – who rely on transit, walking, and bicycling to get around – are often overwhelmingly present in these areas and are forced to use a system that might not have been designed with their mobility in mind.

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Neighborhood design has a direct impact on pedestrian safety and the overall pedestrian experience. One of the most important factors lies in crossing distances – generally the fewer lanes a pedestrian must cross, the better. With each additional travel lane comes higher auto-travel speeds and a greater crossing distance for a pedestrian. This translates to a higher safety risk. If a protected median is not present to provide a safe place to pause when crossing, pedestrians must evaluate and avoid automobile traffic traveling in both directions – a task that is often impossible to do while crossing one hundred feet of asphalt on a 6-lane (or more) roadway. In the South, these wide suburban roadways are far more common than in the North, and southern suburban development patterns provide fewer alternate routes along safer “side streets” more common in the street grids of northern cities. Most northern metro areas were built out well before 1950, and their built environments are uniquely characterized by denser development patterns – mixed-use zoning and gridded street systems. While at the heart of some southern cities lay pockets of relatively dense street grids, these southern pre-industrial neighborhoods are quite small, and usually house a miniscule proportion of metro populations. Southern metro areas were built out much later in the 20th century - at the height of suburbanization - and are largely characterized by these development patterns. Even in the small dense urban centers of the south, we have worked tirelessly to redesign existing urban transportation infrastructure to meet new suburban roadway design standards – widening to eleven-foot travel lanes, busting curbs to increase turning radii at intersections, installing continuous right-turn lanes, etc. Only recently have transportation professionals begun to consider “context sensitive” roadway design solutions and develop standards for implementation.

According to a 2010 report released by Brookings on ‘Suburban Poverty,’ over the last decade poor populations in major American metropolitan areas increased by nearly 6 million and the vast majority of that growth occurred in suburban areas. Furthermore, over the last few years the metro areas with the highest increases in poverty rates were “Sun Belt” cities throughout Florida and California. It’s no coincidence that Florida and California are also the top two states for pedestrian fatality rates. Indeed pedestrian safety is not only a transportation problem, but a fundamental social justice issue. The passing of the American’s with Disabilities Act adopted national standards for pedestrian mobility in the name of civil rights. It is our responsibility as planners to recognize the significance of pedestrian mobility and safety in our daily work.

The long-term solution lies in the way we plan, design and redesign the built environment. This calls for a reevaluation of fundamental land use and transportation principles that have guided development patterns for the last half-century. Indeed, denser mixed-use areas with smaller roadways and more street connectivity have societal benefits from many perspectives – public health, urban design, public utilities and services, and affordable housing. But, these places also tend to be



Good planning and good design includes planning for a safe pedestrian environment.



Pedestrians often perceive crossing mid-block as safer than crossing at an intersection - no turning movements and no intersecting roadway.

Would you feel safe crossing the street at this location? Would you allow your child to?

safer for pedestrians. Ensuring that new development follows these pedestrian-friendly guidelines will be the challenge of the future.

The short-term solution to pedestrian safety requires a holistic approach that reaches across many professions and disciplines. The first step begins in identifying the top five corridors in your area that carry the most severe-injury pedestrian crashes and fatalities. The challenge is then to implement aggressive educational outreach, law enforcement activities and innovative engineering strategies to reduce pedestrian crashes based on the individual crash patterns on these corridors. Every community has unique safety challenges and a sustained, coordinated multidisciplinary approach is the best strategy to solve these problems. However, nearly every community has a handful of roadways that combined carry the majority of the pedestrian crashes. Focus on making the largest impact on these corridors.

Florida’s pedestrian safety problem is not simply another statistic to lament over, or a problem for “the engineers” to fix, and it’s certainly not a side-effect of too much sunshine. As planners, we are guided by the AICP Code of Ethics: “We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.” Addressing pedestrian safety should serve as another opportunity for us to promote building better communities that truly serve everyone. It is not simply our job to plan for the needs of all populations, but it is our duty to take action, be proactive, and do everything within our ability to ensure these needs are fulfilled.

Stephen Benson is pursuing a Master’s degree in Urban & Regional Planning at the University of South Florida and works as a transportation planner for Tindale-Oliver & Associates in Tampa. He can be reached at sbenson@tindaleoliver.com.