

Stop prioritizing speed over safety



The U.S. has the most dangerous roads in the developed world—twice as deadly as Greece and six times as deadly as Norway. The U.S. is also 20 percent more deadly than Chile and 30 percent more deadly than Serbia. The roads in most developed countries are safer than ours and continue to improve. But not ours.

U.S. roads are particularly dangerous for people outside of a car. In 2022, the most recent year with complete federal data, the number of people struck and killed while walking grew to 7,522, marking a 40-year high. This represents an astonishing 75 percent increase in these deaths since 2010.

Danger outside of a vehicle is getting consistently worse: The share of all traffic deaths that were people outside of vehicles hit the highest share in 40 years. These deaths represent kids trying to get to school, workers trying to get to their jobs, and everyday people trying to get to the grocery store or just go for a walk.

While Congress authorized the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) in 1973 and the Transportation Alternatives program in 1991, they make up only 9 percent of the highway program, our federal surface transportation puts up roadblocks to safety, especially if a safety improvement might reduce driving speeds—even though speeding is responsible for almost [one-third of deadly crashes](#) and that doesn't even include crashes where legal speeds are too high to be safe. Reversing the trend in roadway deaths will require a fundamental change in how this country views and funds transportation. We need a federal transportation program that puts safety first.

Policies to improve the state of the system

1. **Require grantees to improve roadway safety.** Safety should be the top priority on all projects built with federal transportation funds.
 - Require states and MPOs to set targets to improve the safety of their roadways for all road users and develop a report on crashes that result in serious injury or fatality, along with design interventions that are tailored to reduce the specific crashes identified.
 - Require states and MPOs to detail in their STIPs and TIPs expected progress toward safety targets and how programmed funds will support them. All approved STIPs and TIPs should be posted on the FHWA and FTA websites and be fully searchable.
 - To assist states and MPOs that fail to meet their safety targets, a share of NHPP and STBG funds, as well as federal competitive awards, must be dedicated to safety projects to address the design concerns produced in the safety report.

- Update benefit-cost guidance to prevent transportation agencies from claiming safety benefits in congestion reduction projects without a study that shows congestion reduction will prevent crashes that result in fatalities and serious injuries for all road users.

2. Conduct research and provide evidence-backed guidance for roadway design. Current transportation design guidance is often not evidence-based. Before placing onerous requirements for design and construction, ensure this guidance is supported by research.

- Require science-based standards at FHWA, including within the roadway design manual and the Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD).
- Make clear that there is no legal protection for any transportation agency that applies a design standard unless the agency documents that it is being used to reduce fatalities, why the standard makes sense in the context, and which users most benefit. Further, design standards included in federal regulation must be backed by publicly available evidence that it reduces crashes that result in fatalities and injuries and in what contexts.
- Provide guidance for context-sensitive speed limits and require the posted speed and design speed to be the same.

3. Establish accountability and transparency to prevent waste, fraud, and abuse.

- Publish safety data, such as the Fatality Analysis Reporting System data, to the public within one year of the end of each calendar year, and expand the data to include roadway environment conditions.
- Collect and analyze the deployment of safety countermeasures and results, updating approved countermeasures based on this information.

4. Give professionals the freedom to experiment. Localities know their transportation systems best. The federal government should reduce restrictions and give communities the flexibility to build based upon their needs.

- Issue guidance to all transportation agencies on how to create and use [quick-build demonstration projects to test new improvements](#) in dangerous corridors and intersections, including for testing innovative designs and markings.
- Give localities the freedom to require the use of local design standards on all roads within their jurisdiction as long as they build upon the safety minimums set within the federal, evidence-based design guidance.
- Create a process for local leaders and residents to challenge interpretations of the Green Book and MUTCD that prohibit safety interventions.

5. Build safe vehicles. Vehicles are getting taller and heavier, posing an increased danger to all road users. U.S. roads will grow even deadlier if we don't consider how modern car design hurts all road users.

- Establish a minimum visibility standard for new cars, ensuring that drivers can see children and wheelchair users when looking at the road ahead without the assistance of a camera.
- If a car does not meet the minimum visibility standard, require the driver to have a commercial driver's license (CDL), and a higher level of insurance coverage.
- Require new cars to include safety technology such as Intelligent Speed Assist.

For questions or more information, please contact our policy team at info@smartgrowthamerica.org



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