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TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMITTEE
CORRESPONDENCE - Nathan Davidowicz

The following article was submitted to the Traffic Safety Committee by Mr. Nathan Davidowicz:

'Now Is the Time to End Traffic Fatalities. Here's a Simple Plan to Do It.'

Strong Towns (www.strongtowns.org)

By Charles Marohn – August 24, 2020

In the months since COVID-19 started spreading across North America, much of our cultural debate has been about whether or not the virus is an urgent threat or a chronic killer.

An urgent threat is something humans are wired to respond to. Our bodies have a natural fight or flight mechanism that kicks in, an instinctive response we also seem capable of engaging with as groups. When terrorists flew planes into buildings in September 2001, we responded collectively with sustained focus and a committed sense of urgency. We can imagine our ancient ancestors responding similarly when threatened by a pack of hunting lions or a hostile nomadic tribe that wandered into their path.

From an evolutionary standpoint, these instincts have obviously served us well, but so has the human tendency to accept chronic deaths, even at the point when they become preventable. Imagine if ancient humans treated every woman who died in childbirth, every person who succumbed to bacterial infection, or every warrior who died in a hunting accident as an acute emergency needing all of their focus and energy. It just wasn't possible; life needed to be lived. Today we can be thankful for the progress that wasn't crowded out by continual panicked reactions.

Knowing that our brains have both an urgent threat response as well as the capacity to adapt to a chronic killer helps us understand why some Americans experience coronavirus with panic and others with seemingly cold resignation. We're wired for both. The same can be said about the drip, drip, drip of traffic-related fatalities. Some of us see an urgent threat and are ready for aggressive action while others accept the ongoing loss of life as a chronic condition of modernity.

The difference in framing makes it difficult for people to have a conversation about what to do. Those with a sense of urgency seem extreme and fanatic. Those without it seem cold and indifferent.

Coronavirus is changing many things. The perception gap between these two perspectives may be one of them.

Less Traffic. More Death.

One thing we witnessed early-on with stay at home orders was a sharp decrease in automobile traffic. In some places there was more than a 50% drop in daily trips. Yet, despite trips being down, traffic fatalities surged. [Fewer people were driving, but more people were dying.](#)

This might seem puzzling, but it shouldn't be. Traffic congestion has a calming effect on traffic. Sharing the road with many other vehicles forces a driver to slow down, either because they have to be prepared to react to more things going on or because another vehicle is physically restraining them from full movement. [Slowing down vehicles](#) saves lives.

Turn this observation around and consider that, for times of the day when there is significant traffic on the road, all the investment in mobility is wasted. All the extra lane width, additional setbacks, recovery areas, and the like provide no added value, despite their immense cost. We might as well have narrow, calming streets where people naturally drive slowly because, for the most part, traffic conditions force people to drive slowly anyway.

With the virus-induced drop in traffic volume, what is being revealed is the incredible level of over-engineering that occurs on nearly all of our streets. Professionals have misapplied lessons from highway design, attempting to compensate for driver error on local streets with what amounts to expansive buffers. Remove the cars that routinely thwart this design and drivers naturally feel empowered to utilize the full capabilities that have been engineered for them. Speeds go up. So do fatalities.

A study of traffic deaths reveals that, in normal conditions, more fatalities occur during non-congested periods of time than during peak hours. The fatality rate per mile traveled is higher in sparsely populated areas than in those that are dense. We often explain these trends away by citing driver error or some cultural quirk but, in reality, both conditions share a similar characteristic that, due to stay-at-home orders, we now see in all streets: drivers are less inhibited by traffic from utilizing the full capabilities of the street.

Let me state what is obvious to anyone who steps back and critically observes our half-full streets: We've engineered them for high performance. We should be engineering them for safety.

The Timing is Right

The response to traffic deaths as an urgent threat tends to rely on [speed limits](#) and [aggressive enforcement](#). While both have their place, they are no match for the subliminal inducement of the driver from an over-engineered street.

Juries have been reluctant to convict drivers who kill, even those who are speeding, for the same reason most people refer to auto collisions as “accidents.” We’ve engineered driving to be a passive activity, one that requires [limited brain focus](#) under almost all conditions, the exceptions being events that are mostly random. It’s difficult to vote to punish a real living person for something that you could easily have been involved in yourself had the roll of the dice been different.

Those who experience traffic deaths as a chronic killer base their acquiescence largely on what they perceive as the prohibitive cost of change. They perceive that they will be forced to sacrifice some enjoyable aspects of modernity—such as convenience of daily travel—in order to experience a reduction in fatalities that may not even happen. They also perceive that any changes will be excessively expensive, a real cost they will share.

The economic slowdown accompanying the pandemic provides an opportunity to dramatically shift these understandings. Everyone is experiencing life with less daily travel, with fewer routine trips. We’ve adapted and made due, and for many, the lack of a long commute has improved their quality of life. The gap between theory and reality has never been smaller.

And the financial motivation to change has never been greater. [Our cities are insolvent](#). Their tax revenues have taken a severe hit, as has the capacity of their families and businesses to pay them. We’re going to be looking for ways to cut costs and improve returns. Narrowing lanes, reducing pavement, planting trees and boulevards, and generally making streets calmer and more walk-bike friendly will reduce costs and improve property values.

The time to act is now.

A Simple Plan

It took us decades to build such expansive networks of dangerous and costly streets. It’s going to take us time to unwind this mess. At Strong Towns, we recommend a sustained approach focusing on four iterative actions.

- 1. Establish a response team to investigate, National Transportation Safety Board-style, every auto-related fatality in your community.** Don’t allow these incidents to be written off as merely driver error but probe and document each contributing factor, including design. Include non-technical people on the team to broaden perspectives and balance the narrow expertise of professionals.

2. **Respond to any design deficiencies rapidly using a low-cost Tactical Urbanism approach.** Study and document driver and non-driver responses to identify changes that improve safety.
3. **Take the lessons learned from investigations and tactical interventions and migrate them to other places within the community that have similar characteristics.** Study tactical interventions in these new locations to corroborate or broaden findings.
4. **Use ongoing maintenance as an opportunity to permanently implement the street designs that have been tested in your community and shown to lower speeds and improve safety.**

Every city in North America, regardless of size or affluence, has an opportunity to make their streets safer while simultaneously reducing their public cost for infrastructure maintenance, enhancing their tax base to broadly build wealth, and improving the quality of life for people living within their community. That's the essence of a Strong Towns approach, and now is the time to get started.'