

Where ‘Vision Zero’ Is Working

A dramatic reduction in traffic deaths in US cities is possible, despite huge headwinds. In some places, progress is starting to become visible.



A pedestrian crosses Washington Street in Hoboken, New Jersey, one of a handful of US cities where traffic safety has been improving dramatically. *Photographer: Jeenah Moon/Bloomberg*

By Angie Schmitt

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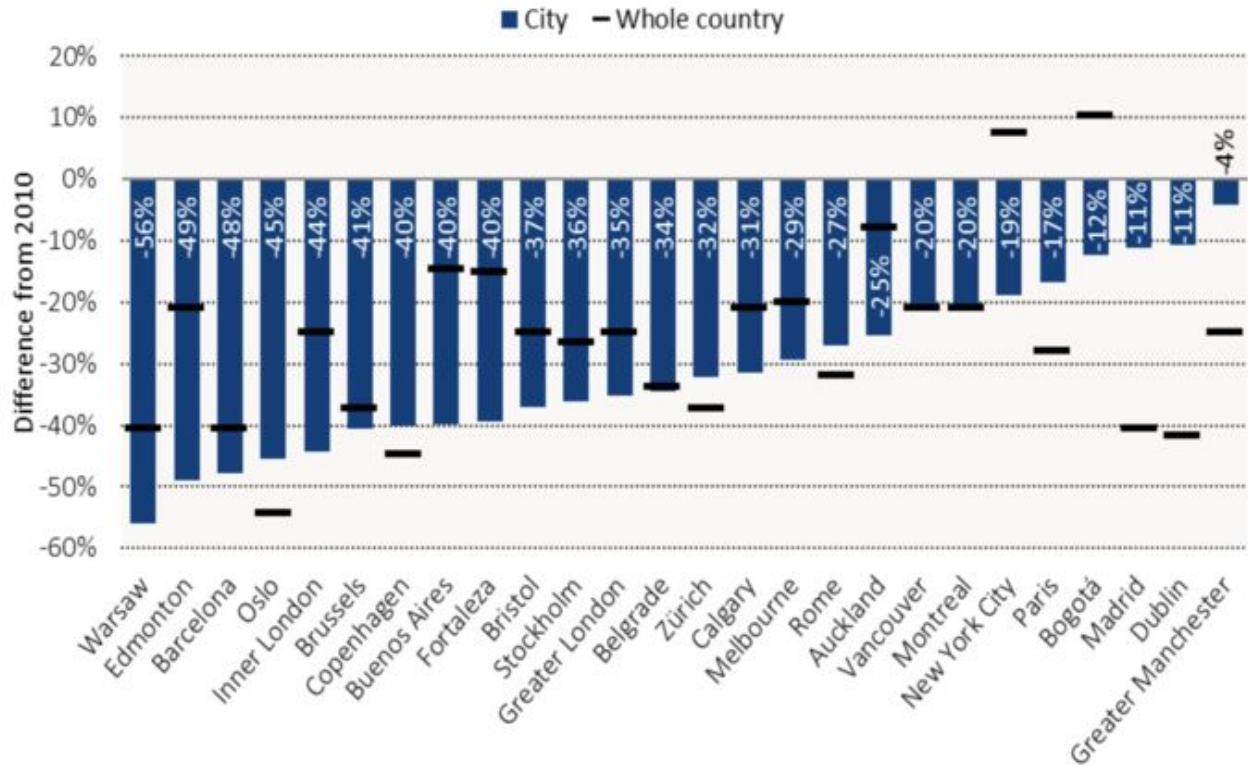
When I was a reporter at the transportation advocacy publication *Streetsblog*, we used to do a little data exercise looking at places that had declared themselves “Vision Zero cities.” Vision Zero is an international safety campaign that aims to completely eliminate traffic fatalities and injuries. Like other journalists, we tried to determine if these civic pledges made any detectable difference in the number of roadway deaths.

At the time, in 2018 and 2019, it was very hard to tell. The data was noisy, especially at the city level. A lot of cities treated Vision Zero more as a declaration than the kind of radical change in policy it demands. Some traffic safety advocates were skeptical of Vision Zero’s prospects for success. And as US traffic fatalities continued to grow during the Covid-19 pandemic, many have remained so.

But some solid evidence is now emerging that it is working, or can work.

A recent chart and report from the International Transport Forum is what gives me hope. In the report, “Monitoring Progress in Urban Road Safety,” the authors compare the decrease in road traffic deaths across 22 major cities that participated in a pledge to reduce traffic deaths. New York City is the only US city included, and one of just four where the city significantly outperformed national-level safety figures.

Figure 8. Change in road traffic deaths by city and country, 2010-20



Note: the number of deaths is captured by a three-year average in both cities and countries. The chart, therefore, represents the percentage change from the 2008-10 average to the 2018-20 average.

Source: ITF IRTAD database, ITF Safer City Streets database.

Chart courtesy of [International Transport Forum](https://www.itf-tar.org/)

Between 2010 and 2020, NYC’s traffic deaths fell 19%, while the US death rate rose 8% – an improvement that translates into a significant number of saved lives. And there is reason to believe that the city can do better now that the framework and the constituency for safety reforms is in place.

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It’s important to remember that, in the US, Vision Zero cities operate in a national environment of increased traffic deaths – *especially* for pedestrians, who are overrepresented in urban crashes. Nationally, thanks to a combination of factors – most importantly growth in SUVs and extra-large pickups – deaths of pedestrians have grown 62% nationally since 2009, according to the nonprofit advocacy organization [Smart Growth America](https://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/).

Now, New York City is a bit of a special case. With 9 million people, it’s almost like a city-state, and its traffic department is more sophisticated and well-resourced than any other US municipality. Mayor Eric Adams recently [committed](#) \$3 billion to Vision Zero efforts. Other major cities like [Phoenix](#) and [Houston](#) – where traffic deaths have been soaring – devote fewer resources to the problem of traffic deaths.

New York City also benefits from the fact that it has a relatively walkable and transit-friendly built environment. Only about 50% of city households even own a car, which makes it especially fertile ground for pedestrian safety advocacy groups. Those organizations have fought for lower speed limits and recently won a state-level law change that will allow speed enforcement cameras to operate in many locations throughout the city [24 hours a day](#).

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And New York City's comparative success has been tempered. The pandemic years have seen rising roadway death rates, as in so many other US cities. And also like many cities, it must deal with a state department of transportation whose programs are not always well aligned with Vision Zero objectives: Victims of traffic violence have to make regular pilgrimages to Albany to win safety measures like the ability to use speed cameras in school zones or lower speed limits.

Federal policy, too, is often not been well aligned with advocates' proposals. Even though Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg made a verbal commitment to the Vision Zero framework and announced a national roadway traffic safety strategy in January 2022, most federal transportation money flows to states, with few strings attached. States use that money to build the kind of arterial roads that are responsible for 63% of pedestrian deaths. These same state DOTs may then resist and overrule local efforts to improve safety.

So cities that adopt Vision Zero policies are battling not only national headwinds like larger and more dangerous passenger vehicles and cultural issues related to the pandemic that have contributed to reckless driving. They also are trying to create an entirely new framework for addressing a problem oftentimes against the systems in place at the more powerful and better resourced agencies handing down programs and policies.

Other success stories are starting to emerge. Hoboken, a small, densely populated city of 60,000 just outside NYC's borders, has achieved dramatic improvements in pedestrian safety thanks to a potentially widely replicable formula that has relied a lot on inexpensive intersection designs, particularly a practice called "daylighting" that improves visibility. Hoboken hasn't had a traffic death in four years.

Nearby Jersey City has not had a single traffic fatality so far this year on non-state roads, and only five deaths on state roads. Advocacy group Safe Streets JC credits the city's progress with aggressive action on road diets, bike lanes and smaller scale interventions like curb bump-outs. By comparison, similarly sized Cincinnati has had 30 deaths so far this year.

That being said, I'm not suggesting anyone start taking a victory lap. Vision Zero cities like Washington, DC, Seattle and Portland, Oregon, are still seeing traffic deaths rise. Last year Portland had its highest total since 1990. In cities like Nashville and Columbus, Ohio, which have just started their Vision Zero journeys, the impact remains unclear.

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Reducing traffic deaths the way New York City did is a labor-intensive process that requires a lot of institutional capacity. Cities need staff that can identify problem areas and then develop and implement cost-effective solutions – often against the background of a fair amount of controversy. There is also whole data management project associated with tracking progress and fine-tuning the approach.

The work is not necessarily any more complex, I suppose, than what goes into building a highway. But right now, it's still the exception rather than the rule; it has not yet been widely formalized into city government in a sustainable way.

Still, I think it should come as some comfort and inspiration to city workers, advocates and political leaders struggling to do this very difficult, but worthwhile thing. There is evidence that well-funded sustained investments in reducing traffic deaths can work, not just abroad but in the US. But until state and federal policies and funding align with this goal, city-led efforts to save lives will continue to be held back.

– Angie Schmitt is a writer and planning consultant and author of [Right of Way: Race, Class and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America](#) .