

UCLA

Policy Briefs

Title

The Pedestrian Battle of Los Angeles: How to Empower Communities to Plan and Implement Pedestrian Road Safety Infrastructure

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02q817k3>

Author

Cáñez, Jorge

Publication Date

2020-07-09

July 2020

The Pedestrian Battle of Los Angeles: How to Empower Communities to Plan and Implement Pedestrian Road Safety Infrastructure



Jorge Cáñez, MURP

Issue

The path to achieving pedestrian safety in Los Angeles is more a political battle than a technical matter. Since its implementation in 2015, LA's Vision Zero policy has failed to reduce fatalities and severe injuries due to road crashes. The most effective way to tackle this problem is through pedestrian engineering improvements, and yet, today in LA, the political cost of implementing such measures is high. A handful of residents can stop pedestrian priority infrastructure in the name of driver convenience. In different parts of the city, these groups have sued and threatened politicians with recall campaigns.

As part of Vision Zero, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT) implemented a policy to build power in communities and work together for safe streets. Known as Dignity Infused Community Engagement (DICE), it served as a way for the city to respond to opposition to pedestrian safety proposals. However, the status and the results of this policy are not clear. Furthermore, the city officially ended DICE operations in April 2020.

This research studies the socio-demographic profiles of pedestrian victims of traffic violence at the neighborhood level in the City of Los Angeles, and the political obstacles that prevent the redesign of the streets from the car-oriented status quo to a people-oriented built environment.

Research Findings

- Walking in a non-white census tract increases the probability of being killed or severely injured by a motor vehicle in Los Angeles (Figure 1). Black people are only 8% of the population, but 20% of all pedestrian fatalities. Meanwhile, median income, vulnerable age (children and older adults), and the number of cars in a household do not have a statistically significant relationship with pedestrian road safety.
- City council members are responsive to residents' demands and threats opposing pedestrian-focused traffic safety. Even when other city agencies and LADOT support these improvements, the city council has more power over deciding the outcome of road safety infrastructure plans. Consequently, there is a need to balance this power dynamic.
- Affluent, car-oriented residents tend to have stronger influence over council members, who prioritize their concerns over those of underserved people. This power dynamic in LA permits small groups of noisy stakeholders to hijack a conversation; they manipulate the narrative to make it seem convenient for everyone. It is vital to give more power to the people that fight for safe streets, whose voices are not taken into account as frequently.

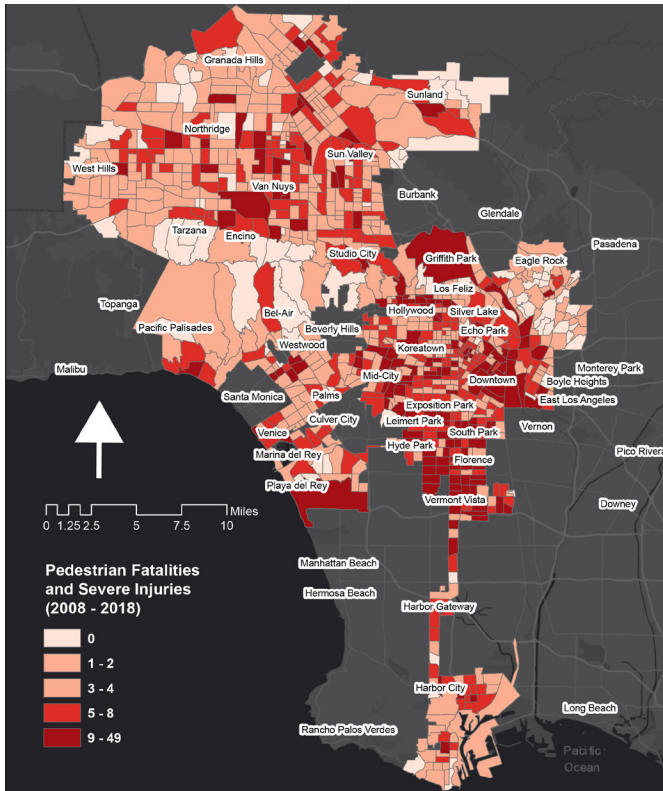


Figure 1: Map of the City of Los Angeles with pedestrian fatalities and severe injuries at a census-tract level
 Source: (TIMS, UC Berkeley, & SWIRTS, 2008-2018)

Study Approach

To analyze the socioeconomic characteristics of pedestrian fatalities and severe injuries on Los Angeles’ streets, the researcher created descriptive statistics about the profile of pedestrian deaths and severe injuries (TIMS, UC Berkeley, & SWIRTS, 2008-2018). Then, using Geographic Information System (GIS) and regression analysis, assessed the following variables at a census-tract level: median income, percentage of white residents, number of households with no vehicle, pollution vulnerability, and age vulnerability (CalEnvironScreen 3.0, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2017).

To analyze the political challenges of implementing pedestrian road safety infrastructure, the researcher interviewed advocates, officeholders, and road safety



Cáñez, J. (2020). The pedestrian battle of Los Angeles: How to empower underserved communities in the City of Los Angeles towards the planning and implementation of pedestrian road safety infrastructure (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h56t06z>

Project ID UCLA ITS-LAS2007 | DOI:10.17610/T6459F

experts between January and May 2020. Additionally, an in-depth literature developed a broad understanding of the political challenges that the authorities, advocates, and residents are facing.

The research used Temple Street from Beverly to Beaudry avenues — part of Historic Filipinotown and Rampart Village — as a case study of pedestrian advocacy in action, and focused on the backlashes to the street’s changes, the advocates’ wins of conversations with LADOT about implementing traffic-calming measures and events, and an example of a new reconfiguration of the street that the research proposes.

Conclusions

- LADOT should revive and strengthen Vision Zero’s DICE policy. This program should continue building power in local communities, especially in historically underserved areas, towards a critical mass of residents fighting for safe streets.
- Los Angeles’ budget should provide the necessary resources for DICE to achieve all Vision Zero’s goals. Also, DICE’s institutional design should be equipped to continue regardless of who is in charge in local politics.
- DICE should have more transparency. Although the DICE webpage has useful information about the program, there is no information about the events and the outcomes. Also, people should be able to continue participating via the internet, telephone, and other appropriate formats to follow up on the projects.
- At a state level, the California Legislature should prioritize the process of substituting the 85th-percentile methodology with a minimum-harm approach to set speed limits (Toda, 2018). The Highway Design Manual by Caltrans should also be updated to reflect the recommendations by the National Association of City Transportation Officials. With these changes, California will be able to reconfigure its streets to prioritize pedestrian safety and potentially save thousands of lives.