

## BENEFITS OF COMPLETE STREETS

# Complete Streets Mean Equitable Streets



Left: Pamela Palma, [pedbikeimages.org](http://pedbikeimages.org); Center: Safe Routes to School National Partnership; Right: Dan Burden

Complete Streets are planned, designed, operated, and maintained to be safe and comfortable for everyone, regardless of age, ability, ethnicity, income, or chosen travel mode. However, the last half-century of transportation planning and design has instead created hundreds of miles of “incomplete” streets – those without safe places to walk, bike, or take public transportation. Such streets particularly dangerous for people of color, older adults, children, and those living in low-income communities. These populations suffer disproportionately from poor street design in increased likelihood of illness, injury, and death. They are also more likely to be cut off from jobs, doctors, friends, and family, and to pay out much more of their budget to transportation than their counterparts.

## Incomplete streets are perilous

The pedestrian fatality rate for Latinos is over 60 percent higher than the rate for whites, and the rate for African Americans is almost 75 percent higher than for whites.<sup>1</sup> Despite representing only 12 percent of the U.S. population, African Americans account for 20 percent of the pedestrian deaths.<sup>2</sup> Latino children are 40 percent more likely than white children to be killed while walking, and the African American pedestrian fatality rate for children is more than twice that of their white peers.<sup>3</sup> African American and Latino children riding in cars are also more likely to be killed than white children per vehicle mile travelled.<sup>4</sup>

Low-income communities are also disproportionately affected by unsafe streets. In counties where more than 20 percent of households have incomes below the federal poverty line, the pedestrian fatality rate is over 80 percent higher than the national average.

Older adults of all ethnicities and incomes are at greater risk, too. Adults over 65 made up 22 percent of all pedestrian fatalities from 2000-2009, despite being only 13 percent of the population.<sup>5</sup> Older Latino adults are especially vulnerable, with a pedestrian fatality rate that is 173 percent higher than that of older white adults.<sup>6</sup> Designing streets for the needs of our aging population can address many of these problems.

## Incomplete streets have disproportionate health impacts

Death and injury from traffic accidents aren't the only health dangers of incomplete streets. Air pollution from traffic is linked with leukemia,<sup>7</sup> lung cancer, heart disease, respiratory illness, and premature death.<sup>8</sup> Children of color are at least 20 percent more likely than their white peers to live in neighborhoods that exceed air quality standards for ozone,<sup>9</sup> and are more likely than white children to suffer from asthma.<sup>10</sup>

When streets are incomplete, it is more difficult for people walk or bicycle for exercise or for transportation. Adult African Americans and Latinos are less likely than white adults to get enough daily physical activity,<sup>11</sup> and are more likely to be obese.<sup>12</sup> Low-income children and adults are also more likely than their middle- or high-income peers to be obese.<sup>13</sup> Yet, when neighborhoods have sidewalks, adults living there are more physically active than are those living in communities without pedestrian facilities.<sup>14</sup> Ensuring that low-income and minority communities have safe places to walk is critical for improving these communities' health.



Left: Michael Ronkin; Right: Stephen Davis, Transportation for America.

## Car-dependent communities create barriers

Many roads are designed with only cars in mind, but at least one-third of Americans do not drive, including children, adolescents, many older adults, people with disabilities, and low-income individuals.<sup>15</sup> Latino and African American households are much more likely to not have access to a vehicle, and people of color who are also low-income are even more likely not to have a car.<sup>16,17</sup> Of those Americans who don't have access to car, 700,000 don't have access to public transportation.<sup>18</sup> Providing transportation options is essential in ensuring that all people have access to education, employment, religious and cultural institutions, and friends and family.

With or without a car, the costs of transportation are a burden for many. This is especially true for low-income families, since people in the lowest 20 percent income bracket spend an average of 42 percent of their annual income on transportation, compared to 22 percent for middle-income households.<sup>19</sup> The burden extends to the middle class as well: when taking transportation costs into account along with housing costs, only 28 percent of American communities are affordable for typical households in the region.<sup>20</sup> Making our streets safe and convenient for walking, riding a bike or taking transit can help families save money on transportation and relieve strained budgets.

## Transportation choices are necessary

Since many people of color are less likely to own cars than whites, it's not surprising that on average they walk for more trips<sup>21</sup>, are four times more likely than whites to commute by transit,<sup>22</sup> and place more importance on street design features that support multimodal travel in surveys of physical activity.<sup>23</sup> People of color also took up bicycling at a faster rate than white Americans from 2000 to 2009.<sup>24</sup> Low-income Americans are more likely to take transit than their middle-income peers<sup>25</sup> and more likely to bike for transportation,<sup>26</sup> and low-income children in urban areas are more likely to walk or bike to school.<sup>27</sup> Transportation policy that treats facilities for these users as an optional extra perpetuates the inequalities and ignores major segments of the country's population.

## Civil rights and equity advocates support Complete Streets

Complete Streets has widespread support from national organizations devoted to civil rights and economic and social equity such as PolicyLink<sup>28</sup> and the Leadership Conference Education Fund,<sup>29</sup> as well as coalitions such as the Equity Caucus at Transportation for America<sup>30</sup> and the Transportation Equity Network of Gamaliel.<sup>31</sup> These groups know that Complete Streets policies are key elements of a transportation system that provides for the needs of all users regardless of race, income, age or disability.

**Learn more at [www.smartgrowthamerica.org/completestreets](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/completestreets).**

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