

SAFETY FINDINGS

Practitioner Perceptions of Large US City Traffic Fatality Problems: Automobile Dependence, Weak Institutions, and "Driving with Impunity"?

Robert Schneider, Ph.D.¹, Henry Barbee, Master of Urban Planning¹

¹ Department of Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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Findings

Traffic fatality rates increased more in large US cities than in the rest of the country between 2008-2012 and 2018-2022. Interviews with practitioners from seven high-fatality-rate cities versus seven low-fatality-rate cities suggested that automobile-oriented land use patterns and roadway designs underpinned high fatality rates. While these relationships are well-established, practitioner comments also suggested a need to investigate whether 1) weak institutional support in high-fatality-rate cities prevented changing high-risk system characteristics and 2) more speeding and reckless driving may have contributed to large city fatality rate increases in the 2010s.

1. QUESTIONS

Dozens of large US cities adopted Vision Zero in the 2010s (Ferenchak 2023; Vision Zero Network 2026), but between 2008-2012 and 2018-2022, fatalities per 100,000 people in the 100 largest US cities increased by 33% (6.97 to 9.28) while increasing by only 5% (12.0 to 12.6) in all other parts of the country (Schneider et al. 2026). Further, some large cities experienced much worse traffic fatality outcomes than others (Schneider et al. 2026). Recognizing this, we interviewed traffic safety professionals in 14 of the 100 largest cities to gain insights about local fatality trends during the 2010s. We asked: what factors do practitioners in cities with high versus low traffic fatality rates think influenced their local safety outcomes?

2. METHODS

In mid-2025, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven practitioners from cities with "low" traffic fatality rates during 2018-2022 (lower than 5 per 100,000) (Cities L1-L7), and seven practitioners from cities with "high" traffic fatality rates (higher than 10 per 100,000) (Cities H1-H7). The 14 cities were spread across eight of the ten USDOT University Transportation Center regions (USDOT 2025). Notably, the seven low-fatality-rate cities experienced fatality rate decreases or only slight increases between the two study periods; the seven high-fatality-rate cities experienced large traffic fatality rate increases.

Since pedestrians and bicyclists experienced the steepest increases in large city fatalities during the 2010s, we interviewed practitioners from each city with at least five years of pedestrian and bicyclist safety experience during that decade. Interview questions were largely framed around pedestrian and bicyclist safety, but interviews encompassed safety for all modes.

The first part of the interview covered changes in the city’s pedestrian, bicyclist, and automobile passenger fatality rates during the 2010s. We asked practitioners if they thought these changes were related to changes in local characteristics such as transportation system, land use, and development patterns; pedestrian, bicycle, public transit, and automobile activity levels; roadway user behaviors; or socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., population age, employment, job types). The second part of the interview covered changes in community-level safety policies; safety projects and programs; local advocacy and elected leadership; and organizational characteristics (e.g., agency staffing, budget, grants).

Interviews typically lasted 45-60 minutes. The lead author led the interviews, and the co-author took detailed notes. After interviews were complete, the authors co-developed a thematic coding framework and applied it across multiple participants (Appendix A). The co-author reviewed hand notes to code responses by theme, and the lead author cross-checked this coding. Both reviewed audio recordings and transcripts to report accurate quotes.

3. FINDINGS

Despite some commonalities, there were several notable differences in how interviewees from high- versus low-fatality-rate cities discussed local traffic safety changes during the 2010s.

Practitioners from nearly all high-fatality-rate cities emphasized dispersed development patterns ([Table 1](#), Part A) and wide arterial roadways ([Table 1](#), Part B) that encourage high levels of automobile use and high traffic speeds. This *structural safety disadvantage* developed over decades, so it is unlikely to explain rapid fatality rate increases during the 2010s, though some interviewees suggested it may have been exacerbated by recent population decline and dispersion of jobs and other activities.¹ Conversely, interviewees from low-fatality-rate cities alluded to *structural safety advantage*: compact development patterns and relatively narrow roadways likely promoted safety. These findings are consistent with prior safe system research (Ewing and Dumbaugh 2009; Ederer et al. 2023; Ferencak 2023).

¹ Five of the seven high-fatality-rate cities lost population during the 2010s, and the other two were in the southern US and experienced most of their growth in automobile-dependent peripheral areas. In contrast, all seven low-fatality-rate cities gained population and increased their population densities.

Table 1. Practitioner Quotes Illustrating Land Use and Transportation System Themes

Theme	Cities with Low Traffic Fatality Rates	Cities with High Traffic Fatality Rates
A. Land Use and Development Patterns	<u>Summary</u> Had compact urban form and gained population (and population density). This made it easier to encourage travel by walking, bicycling, and public transit. <u>Quotes</u> • “We were trying to make sure our development was pedestrian-friendly. That brought amenities through the design changes that we could get out of the developers.” (City L4) • “[City L7] just adapted to the needs and responses of a growing population and changing times...you just can't cater to one mode of transportation, like the automobile.” (City L7)	<u>Summary</u> Had sprawling urban form and experienced population loss and de-concentration of jobs and other activities. This incentivized driving, and under-capacity arterial streets made it easier for drivers to speed. <u>Quotes</u> • “In terms of safety, de-densifying leads to a decrease in local amenities, meaning more driving to get goods, and higher crash rates.” (City H1) • “[City H4] is a sprawling suburban city. Stroads [high-speed, high-traffic arterial streets with adjacent commercial development] are our entire high injury network.” (City H4) • “I think maybe our [traffic] volumes are lower than a decade ago, which promotes bad behavior such as speeding.” (City H6)
B. Roadway Design	<u>Summary</u> Easier to implement multimodal roadway redesign projects and reduced automobile speeds in a more compact urban environment. <u>Quotes</u> • “We don't have a lot of big streets...We've been doing 4 to 3 lane safety conversions on those in recent years. That's our secret sauce I think: 1 lane in each direction.” (City L5) • “I think it comes down to our notorious traffic problems and gridlock. That really does have a factor in slowing traffic down. Compared to other cities where there is a lot less traffic and maybe a lot more lane miles...we are always going to be constrained by right-of-way...” (City L7)	<u>Summary</u> Took longer to implement roadway redesign projects, and new multimodal designs were a smaller portion of their automobile-dominated roadway networks. <u>Quotes</u> • “[City H2] has very wide roads, very straight. All the ingredients for getting up to high speed... It almost didn't matter what got corrected over a 10-year period; it was never going to be enough to rectify 60 to 70 years of standard 7-lane roadways in a suburban setting in a majority of the city.” (City H2) • “I end up using a lot of our budget on maintaining what we have. It's hard to deploy some new infrastructure without improving everything around it.” (City H4)

Importantly, our interviewees in high-fatality-rate cities did not give up in the face of local structural safety disadvantage. All cited proactive local safety efforts during the 2010s, even if they were relatively small projects with minimal positive impact on citywide fatality rates. However, their efforts, already hindered by well-known land use and roadway barriers to traffic safety, met two additional challenges that deserve further exploration: weak institutional support for making structural changes and worsening driver behavior.

First, many practitioners from high-fatality-rate cities mentioned weak institutional support for addressing structural safety disadvantage: slow adoption of “Complete Streets” policies (Smart Growth America 2025), limited budget resources for safety, few staff who address safety, limited advocacy from community members, and weak safety leadership from elected officials (Table 2). This lack of support suggests a predicament: cities with greater structural safety disadvantage need broad-based institutional support to reverse fatality trends, yet appear less likely to generate it because of political and agency inertia rooted in automobile-dependent systems. In contrast, most practitioners from low-fatality-rate cities emphasized that

prioritization from elected officials translated into staff across departments viewing safety as central to their work. They also connected political support to increased staff and budget resources for safety.

Still, changes in institutional support are likely insufficient to explain the steep rise in fatalities in the high-fatality-rate cities during the 2010s. Instead, the relatively constant low levels of institutional support described by interviewees from high-fatality-rate cities could have created an inability to react quickly and effectively to growing traffic safety problems. Some studies have noted the role of institutional support in successful program implementation (Handy and McCann 2011; Hyder et al. 2012; Evenson et al. 2023), so future research should examine how institutional support can be increased in the challenging environment of high-fatality-rate cities.

Second, interviewees from all seven high-fatality-rate cities emphasized that driver behaviors like speeding and disobeying traffic controls contributed to traffic safety problems during the 2010s. Many noted that multilane arterial roadways—often designed to maximize traffic flow—enabled drivers to speed, especially at off-peak times. Further, nearly all of these interviewees mentioned reduced traffic safety enforcement as contributing to dangerous driving behavior, a connection suggested in national media articles (Badger and Blatt 2024; Shill 2025). Several practitioners characterized this behavior as “driving with impunity” ([Table 3](#)). In contrast, reckless driving was a less prominent theme among interviewees from low-fatality-rate cities. Several practitioners in this group highlighted positive safety results from traffic safety camera programs in the 2010s and were interested in using other technologies to enforce safe driving behaviors. Overall, these interviews call for renewed attention toward understanding how fair and effective enforcement can complement land use and roadway design strategies to improve traffic safety.

Practitioner interviewees linked structural safety disadvantage to baseline differences in fatality rates across cities, but the rapid increase in fatality rates among some cities during the 2010s is unlikely to be due to changes in land use and roadway development patterns alone. Those characteristics have evolved over decades and likely require broad-based institutional support to change. Our interviews suggest further exploration of both institutional support and societal shifts in driver behavior to understand and ultimately reverse recent changes in large city traffic fatality rates.

Table 2. Practitioner Quotes Illustrating Institutional Support Themes

Theme	Cities with Low Traffic Fatality Rates	Cities with High Traffic Fatality Rates
A. Citywide Complete Streets and Traffic Safety Policies	<u>Summary</u> Most adopted Complete Streets during late 2000s or early 2010s, and several adopted Vision Zero policies during early 2010s. <u>Quotes</u> • "Some cities...are nervous about adopting the [Vision Zero] terminology, but I think at 10 years we're actually trying to figure out how to double down and re-center the message." (City L1) • "[City L7] adopted Complete Streets fairly early on. The city put out its own Complete Streets Design Guide...at least 10 years ago." (City L7)	<u>Summary</u> Most adopted Complete Streets or Vision Zero policies during late 2010s or early 2020s or have not yet adopted policies. <u>Quotes</u> • "City staff talked about [adopting Vision Zero], but there was never a true effort to consider it." (City H2) • Even with a Complete Streets policy during the 2010s, safety was not emphasized explicitly: "Safety is not baked into the decision-making process...It is nobody's job to systematically achieve safety outcomes." (City H3)
B. Traffic Safety Budget	<u>Summary</u> Had higher incomes and actively pursued grants; created dedicated funding sources for multimodal safety. <u>Quotes</u> • "We've been really funded well to get a lot of these improvements moving and on the ground with a lot of support from politicians, both at the city and state level." (City L1) • "We have a whole budget [category] just for safe streets upgrades." (City L2)	<u>Summary</u> Had lower incomes and were under-resourced; traffic safety competed against other priorities such as crime reduction. <u>Quotes</u> • "[City H2] has so many other problems, such as high crime and poor education" that traffic safety is not a priority. (City H2) • "The crime rate is very high in [City H3]...law enforcement still needs to respond" so it doesn't prioritize resources for traffic safety. (City H3)
C. Transportation Agency Staffing and Structure	<u>Summary</u> Increased transportation agency staff focused on multimodal safety and institutionalized multimodal planning, design, and safety. <u>Quotes</u> • City L4 doubled its staff dedicated to multimodal safety improvements, but "by 2020 the [broader] division had taken much of the responsibility. [Agency X] institutionalized so many multimodal improvements." (City L4) • "There were two transportation planners in the city in 2008. We have 25ish now." (City L5)	<u>Summary</u> Relied on small number of experts to plan and design multimodal projects and address safety and did not change staff roles significantly. <u>Quotes</u> • [City H3] public works department does many things besides transportation, so "they don't treat it as something that needs to be improved...lack of departmental mission." (City H3) • "Nobody on [City H4] staff was devoted to traffic safety or multimodal transportation during the 2010s." (City H4)
D. Community Support for Traffic Safety	<u>Summary</u> Had strong elected official leadership for traffic safety. General public support for slower vehicle speeds; acceptance of some reduced auto capacity. <u>Quotes</u> • "We have always had good support from elected officials, and various departments." (City L5) • "Outside of downtown, we don't have to think about [car] capacity very much. We've done 4-3 lane conversions with a bus lane, even without doing outreach, because we knew there would be no issue. And have heard no significant pushback since." (City L5) • "I can't think of any major project within the city that was cancelled or rolled back because of staunch opposition." (City L7)	<u>Summary</u> Had limited elected official leadership and relatively weak community safety advocacy. Public was interested in maintaining or increasing automobile mobility. <u>Quotes</u> • "Lack of funding and politics is a real issue. It felt like lip service when we adopted Vision Zero, not a lot of actual resources or work being put towards it, even though we have a great staff." (City H4) • "Mayor's office was not interested...didn't want speed humps." (City H3) • "The elected officials' attitude was 'just give more pedestrian jaywalking tickets'" (City H2) • Street culture is: "Drive fast. Pedestrians are expected to defer to automobiles." (City H5)

Table 3. Practitioner Quotes Illustrating Driver Behavior Themes

Theme	Cities with Low Traffic Fatality Rates	Cities with High Traffic Fatality Rates
A. Driver Behavior Changes	<u>Summary</u> Only three cities noted driver behaviors contributing to safety problems.	<u>Summary</u> All perceived that driver behaviors like speeding and disobeying traffic control may have contributed to local traffic safety problems; six of seven noted increases in reckless driving during the 2010s. <u>Quotes</u> • “Reckless driving has dramatically increased over time.” (City H1) • “[City H2] drivers can basically drive with impunity. Speeding is a regular occurrence, it’s very rare to get a speeding ticket...” (City H2) • “There was a locally marked increase in criminal driving...driving 90 mph on surface streets.” (City H3) • “Our police also have a no-chase policy [since] the early 2010s after an incident. Staffing shortages during that time, which led people to thinking they could drive with impunity.” (City H6)
B. Traffic Safety Enforcement	<u>Summary</u> Had positive experiences with automated safety enforcement during the 2010s (two of the cities), adopted speed safety cameras in the 2020s (two cities), and were interested in using other technologies to support safe driving behaviors (one city). <u>Quotes</u> • “Every time we have to go back to the State Legislature, we put together a report that shows the benefits [of speed cameras] and why we want it renewed and expanded.” (City L1) • “One magic wand I would love is...intelligent speed assist on all vehicles.” (City L1) • During the 2010s, “We also really ramped up our automated traffic enforcement...When we put [cameras] in, they do lower the number of crashes and fatal crashes.” (City L4)	<u>Summary</u> Traffic safety enforcement waned in many cities. <u>Quotes</u> • “The change in the police pursuit policy [so that police could not pursue drivers who fled from traffic stops] happened in the mid-2010s. People could drive with reckless abandon without fear of getting pulled over.” (City H1) • “I had a new midblock crosswalk...I wanted to propose that for the first couple weeks when this crosswalk opens, they just get some officers stationed there to issue courtesy warnings for drivers who don’t stop. The most senior ranking officer in the room literally laughed and said, ‘no, we’re not doing that.’” (City H2) • The local increase in traffic fatalities was “paired with a collapse in enforcement.” (City H3) • “It was hard for us to keep [police] officers for a while. Speed enforcement wasn’t active. We see drag racing and drifting around the city...I don’t think getting pulled over is in people’s consciousness.” (City H5) • “We haven’t been enforcing traffic [laws]...penalties for speeding have gone down. Lots of retirements from police force, not a lot of funding capacity. They’ve triaged their funding, and have allocated less towards traffic enforcement.” (City H7)

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Appendix A. Practitioner Interview Themes

Interviewees from high and low fatality rate cities mentioned multiple themes related to local traffic fatality trends in the 2010s. Tables [A.1](#) and [A.2](#) list prominent themes that we identified across the interviews. These tables also note which practitioners emphasized each theme to show various levels of consistency across interviews. We coded a theme as being “emphasized” if the interviewee elaborated on the topic rather than just giving a short response to one of the preliminary interview questions.

The “Other Themes” column notes additional points that individual interviewees emphasized about traffic safety in their local communities. These included reduced empathy and social cohesion, more driver distraction, increased poverty and homelessness, and larger vehicle sizes. Changes in exposure were often mentioned in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, but few practitioners connected this to fatality rate changes during the 2010s. None of these themes were as common as the prominent themes described in the main paper, but they could be explored through future research.

Table A.1. Prominent Practitioner Interview Themes Related to Traffic Fatality Trends across the 2010s: Low Fatality Rate Cities

City	1A: Land Use & Development Patterns	1B: Roadway Design	2A: Citywide Complete Streets & Traffic Safety Policies	2B: Traffic Safety Budget	2C: Transportation Agency Staffing and Structure	2D: Community Support for Traffic Safety	3A: Driver Behavior Changes	3B: Traffic Safety Enforcement	Other Themes Emphasized by Practitioners
L1		++	++	++	++	++		++	Traffic safety cameras have been effective; Maintenance of infrastructure requires resources; Larger vehicles increase risk despite other improvements; Future vehicle technology can be used to help manage speeds; Data are crucial for addressing push-back against new projects
L2		++	++	++	++	++		+/-	Lower income residents moving further from city center; Public outreach for projects is extensive; Challenges with state-controlled roadways and state law constraints; Data are crucial for addressing push-back against new projects
L3		++	++	++	++		--	--	Many quick build projects were effective, but some major roadway redesign projects were controversial and extensive public outreach slowed projects
L4	++	++	++		++			++	Traffic safety cameras have been effective; Beyond transportation agency scope, but important to address sources of poverty and drug addiction that put people at higher traffic fatality risk
L5		++	++	++	++	++	+/-		Supportive state-level policies have helped traffic safety efforts
L6		++				--	--		Less empathy in society and technological distraction may contribute to traffic safety problems; Drivers travel faster than they used to; Major roadway projects have long timelines (5+ years), slowing pace of safety improvements; There has been some community resistance to reducing traffic speeds
L7	++	++	++			++			Reckless driving has always occurred, but investment in pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure has helped those modes reach a critical mass that may make drivers become more aware of them; Maintenance of new traffic safety infrastructure is a challenge

Legend:

++ = The interviewee discussed this theme as having a positive relationship with traffic safety in their city.

+/- = The interviewee discussed this theme as having both positive and negative relationships with traffic safety in their city.

- = The interviewee discussed this theme as having a negative relationship with traffic safety in their city.

Table A.2. Prominent Practitioner Interview Themes Related to Traffic Fatality Trends across the 2010s: High Fatality Rate Cities

City	1A: Land Use & Development Patterns	1B: Roadway Design	2A: Citywide Complete Streets & Traffic Safety Policies	2B: Traffic Safety Budget	2C: Transportation Agency Staffing and Structure	2D: Community Support for Traffic Safety	3A: Driver Behavior Changes	3B: Traffic Safety Enforcement	Other Themes Emphasized by Practitioners
H1	--	+/-			--		--	--	Allowing families to choose schools has increased bussing and school traffic which may have increased pedestrian crash risk (loss of walkable neighborhood schools)
H2	--	--	--	--		--	--	--	Nighttime pedestrian crashes associated with 24-hour work activity in city; Big challenge: public perception that traffic fatalities are inevitable
H3			--	--	--	--	--	--	Population loss; Challenge of larger vehicle sizes and driver distraction increasing pedestrian and bicyclist fatality risk
H4	--	--			--	--	--	--	Changing "social contract": less respect for others in society may increase traffic fatality risk; Larger vehicles increase fatality risk; Distracted driving is becoming more common
H5	--	--		--	+/-	--		--	Driver behavior didn't change much in the 2010s since it has been reckless since the 1980s and 1990s (people have been raised to run stop lights and stop signs); Community leaders didn't want to say that they had a traffic safety problem; Restrictive roadway standards reinforce an automobile-dominated status quo
H6	--				--		--	--	Traffic crashes skew toward lower-income neighborhoods where there are also wider roadways
H7		--	--				--	--	The city has lower incomes than other parts of the state, making it harder to improve safety; Changing the culture of automobile entitlement and speed is a challenge for traffic safety

Legend:

++ = The interviewee discussed this theme as having a positive relationship with traffic safety in their city.

+/- = The interviewee discussed this theme as having both positive and negative relationships with traffic safety in their city.

- = The interviewee discussed this theme as having a negative relationship with traffic safety in their city.