

A walker's paradise–lost!

At least three pedestrians are hit by cars each day in San Francisco

By Natalie Burdick

With more than three dozen parks packed into fewer than 49 square miles, it takes almost no time to walk to green, open space in San Francisco. While not quite as well known as its East Coast counterpart, Golden Gate Park is actually 20 percent larger than New York's famed Central Park. Moreover, as a peninsula famous the world over for its hilly terrain – by some counts there are as many as 57 hills – the city (and most often its public parks including Buena Vista, Lafayette Square, MacLaren, and Alamo) is graced with breathtaking views of the Pacific Ocean to the west, the Golden Gate and Marin Headlands to the north, the San Francisco Bay and Contra Costa Hills to the east – and not to mention the city's own ever-changing, fog-wrapped shores and skyline.

The hills are alive

In between the 48 (named) hills dotting the city's scant seven by seven miles, its rich patchwork of intimately-scaled and distinct neighborhoods, the unique Victorian and Edwardian architectural heritage, and San Francisco's turbulent economic, geologic and social history, ensure there's no end to a walker's delight. Search Google for "walk san francisco" and page after endless page of walks are returned – pick from your choice of historic, cultural or nature-focused outings. There are also walks about chocolate, beer, public and street art, and a seemingly endless list of niche interests from hidden stairways to ghost haunts – there's even an annual, all-day urban trek that stretches 12 to 14 miles across at least ten of the city's hills each September called Peak2Peak.

With its mild climate, compact geographic area, and second highest-ranked transit access in the U.S., San Francisco was the obvious choice to be the first



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Street memorial to Emily Dunn, a pedestrian killed in the Castro District in 2011.

American city to host Walk to Work Day, and to reclaim its streets from car traffic by opening them up to tens of thousands of pedestrians with Sunday Streets, a monthly weekend event that highlights different neighborhoods from March to October. San Francisco also innovated the "parklet," which literally transforms a parking space into a small public park. There are now over forty of these parklets throughout San Francisco (the most of any city), offering spaces where people can stop to sit or rest. They are designed by a local community partner and provide greenery, art or some other visual amenity to enhance the experience of traveling by foot.

Indeed, the shining city on the hill seems to be a walker's paradise. Which is why many are surprised to learn: each day, at least three people are hit by cars, while they walk in San Francisco. Annually, 20 people are killed and at least 100 suffer serious, life-changing injuries. For every victim of gun violence, there are five people who are hit by cars in the city. In fact, one out of every four trauma cases at San Francisco General Hospital involves a pedestrain hit by a vehicle.

San Francisco is literally California's most dangerous city for pedestrians, making up fifty percent of all traffic deaths in San Francisco – four times the national average of around twelve percent.

Last year, 31 people lost their lives in traffic crashes. Twenty-one of those people were walking when they were struck and killed. People like little two-year-old Mi'yana Gregory; a 78-year-old grandmother of eight; music teacher, Pei Fong Yim Lee; and 27-year-old Zach Watson, who was walking his bicycle on a sidewalk when he was hit.

What accounts for such disproportionate number of injuries and deaths in a city that welcomes one of the highest walking rates in the country? And more importantly, is there anything that can be done to make the city's streets safer for people to walk here?

How to make streets safer for walkers

The good news for San Francisco is only six percent of its streets account for more than sixty percent of the total crashes involving those who walk. As part of a Pedestrian Strategy released by the Mayor's Office in 2013, these high-injury corridors and intersections were identified using years of collected data from the San Francisco Police Department and the Department of Public Health. The City has detailed information on both the most common locations for injuries and deaths, and the top five illegal driving behaviors that lead to these collisions.

Understanding that speeding, not yielding to pedestrians in a crosswalk, running a red light, making an improper turn, and not stopping at stop signs are the leading causes behind crashes, and knowing where these collisions are concentrated, offers the City a unique opportunity to focus engineering, enforcement, and even education efforts to successfully addressing its traffic violence.

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A quick look at the list of the most dangerous corridors (See Figure A or map at http://sfgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/OnePane/basicviewer/index.html?appid=335c508503374f5d94c95cb2a1f3f4f4) shows most crashes involving pedestrians happen on wide arterials and/or fast, one-way streets, including Geary Boulevard, Sunset Boulevard, Mission Street, 19th Avenue, Polk Street, and along Market, cross-streets like 6th and 8th. Roads where drivers feel like they're on a freeway, despite the fact they are in dense, urban neighborhoods, are disproportionately concentrated in communities of concern including SoMa, Chinatown and the Tenderloin.

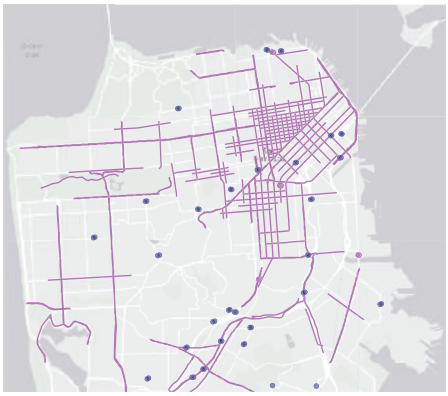


Figure A: Map of the most dangerous pedestrian corridors in the City of San Francisco

Vision Zero

In 2014, a coalition of community groups, led by the pedestrian advocacy nonprofit Walk San Francisco in partnership with the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition, launched *Vision Zero* – a goal to eliminate ALL traffic-related deaths in ten years. The high-injury corridor maps have isolated not just where crashes involving those walking are clustered, but also collisions which involve bicyclists and motorists. Layering all three high-injury maps together, it turns out over 70 percent of all the serious and fatal traffic injuries occur on only 12 percent of city streets. Targeting this subset of streets with the right mix of interventions, San Francisco could effectively reach a zero traffic fatalities goal for preventable collisions.

The effort would require the City to commit to funding and implementing proven engineering, enforcement, and targeted education solutions within a ten-year period to bring the number of motorist, bicyclist, and pedestrian deaths to zero. While certainly an aggressive goal, the results are achievable and well worth pursuing to eliminate preventable losses of life.

Sweden, where Vision Zero originated in 1997, has already demonstrated success in bringing down their road fatalities, even as overall car ownership and driving has doubled since 1970. Fatalities involving pedestrians in Sweden have fallen by almost 50 percent in the last five years. Most strikingly, road deaths of children under the age of seven have plummeted: in 2012 only one child was killed, compared with 58 in 1970. In the U.S., cities like New York, Chicago, and Seattle have begun adopting Vision Zero as well.

In San Francisco, driving at unsafe speeds is responsible for five times as many collisions as driving or bicycling under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Yet, despite the lethal impacts from speeding, driving faster than is safe for a given road is a cultural norm.

A triple threat

While most people understand intuitively that speeding can be more dangerous, very few know that speeding is a triple threat. Traveling at a higher speed increases the severity of any crash: 9 out of 10 people hit by a car going 20 miles per hour will survive; if the car is traveling at 40 miles per hour, just 2 of 10 can hope to survive. The faster the car is moving, the longer the driver's reaction time *and* the car's braking distance (at 20 mph the braking distance is less than a hundred feet, at 40 mph it is nearly three hundred feet), making it harder to stop in time or even swerve to avoid crashes. Lastly, at speeds greater than 20 mph, drivers lose their peripheral vision, preventing them from spotting people who may be stepping off a curb and into the crosswalk, as they innately look farther down the roadway ahead.

With speed being the key factor in safety, particularly for the most vulnerable road users – seniors and children – there are proven interventions that would make San Francisco more walkable. Given that seniors are five times more at risk of injury or death than the general adult population, and that here in San Francisco, although seniors make up only 17 percent of the total population, they account for 50 percent of pedestrian fatalities, targeting speed reduction solutions around senior centers would go a long way to reducing the city's traffic deaths. These solutions include lowering speed limits in combination with increased enforcement using automated safety enforcement cameras, changing signal timing for longer crossing intervals, and, one of the most effective strategies, implementing road diets (the process of removing traffic lanes and reusing that space for other modes of transportation, like bike lanes, transit only lanes, or wider painted sidewalks).

In addition to the increased enforcement for the most lethal, illegal driving behaviors like speeding, not stopping at lights and stop signs, unsafe turns, and not yielding to people in crosswalks, the most important and lasting changes involve street designs that prioritize safety over vehicle volumes and speed.

In a dense, urban environment like San Francisco there are proven solutions that will dramatically increase safety. They're often low-cost and easy to implement. Here are some of the most effective treatments:

- Countdown signals for pedestrians
- "Daylighting" near crosswalks that push parking back from the intersection to open up lines of sight between both people and cars
- Sidewalk extensions at intersections called "bulb-outs" to shorten the crossing distance and make the intersections more human-scaled
- Well-marked crosswalks

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• Lower speed limits (Walk San Francisco led and won an effort to make San Francisco the first major city in the state to adopt slower 15 MPH speed limits around schools in 2012.)
• Turn restrictions where unsafe turns are known to be the cause of crashes
• The use of pedestrian scrambles (where all vehicle traffic stops to allow people to safely cross intersections in all directions)

Sharing the road

Safety solutions can also serve to make our streets more livable. Crossing islands (also know as medians and refuges), parklets, and sidewalks can include stormwater gardens, trees and other greenery, which all work together to slow drivers down and reinforce the idea that roads are public spaces to be shared by motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians – not the exclusive domain of the car. These safety amenities also enhance the walkability, sustainability, and vitality of San Francisco's public spaces, making it more inviting and enjoyable for everyone.

It's worth noting that San Francisco's streets and public rights-of-way make up 25 percent of the city's land area; more space than all of its many public parks combined. Reclaiming these streets to create safe, shared spaces will not only protect lives, it will enhance the overall health of the community members, increase the economic vitality of neighborhoods, and support a more sustainable environment.

As the City works towards implementing Vision Zero, visitors and residents alike will be able to continue to delight not only in San Francisco's unique bounty of scenic views, its treasure trove of hidden gems discoverable only from a walker's perspective, and all the tremendous health, environmental, and social benefits of travel by foot – but they will finally be able to do so without the unnecessary risk of having to navigate fast, dangerous and unwelcoming streets.

Meeting the Vision Zero goal requires another cultural shift; a change from the commonplace acceptance (and in fact, resignation) that accidents simply happen.

It requires city planners, traffic engineers, law enforcement (including the police and the District Attorney), the public, and the elected officials, to understand that most traffic collisions are not random acts of God or uncontrollable accidents. Instead, it requires refocusing efforts to analyze how crashes happen and evaluate how they can be prevented. But rather than the traditional finger-wagging approach towards changing personal behavior, thinking needs to shift to emphasize the need for designing a smarter road and traffic system, one which effectively takes into account the inevitability of human error.

After all, if we can create a road system where people can be safe, why shouldn't we? Why shouldn't we work to end the tragic and devastating loss of life, and the untold emotional toll to family, friends, and communities? Why shouldn't we end the tens of millions in annual financial costs in health care and lost wages? Why shouldn't we, if we can?

The same questions were asked in 1970, when automobile manufacturers fought the requirement to install automatic restraint systems in all their vehicles. As recently as 1981, only 11 percent of U.S. drivers wore seatbelts, reflecting the acceptance at the time of preventable deaths resulting from car crashes. But, starting in 1989, the cultural pendulum began to shift and seatbelt use became mandated. In 2013, seatbelt use reached a high of 87 percent – a cultural (and legal) shift, which has saved an estimated 147,246 lives (Donna Glassbrenner, *Estimating the Lives Saved by Safety Belts and Air Bags* (Washington DC: National Center for Statistics and Analysis National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Paper No. 500).

It's time for the next major cultural shift on the roads that take us to and from our jobs, shops, schools, and homes – one where no preventable loss of life is acceptable, one where mistakes don't end inevitably in tragedies.

By meeting the city's Vision Zero goal of eliminating all traffic deaths by 2024, San Francisco could become a veritable walker's paradise – and so much more.


Burdick

Natalie Burdick directs Walk San Francisco*'s membership, volunteer, community events, and outreach programs. Walk SF (walksf.org) has been San Francisco's only pedestrian advocacy organization since 1998. She partners with community members, nonprofit groups, and agency and elected staff, to build awareness and support for pedestrian safety, including advancing Walk SF's Vision Zero effort, a campaign to end all traffic-related deaths in ten years.*

She joined Walk SF in 2012 after five years in marketing and development at Santa Monica's Heal the Bay. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from the University of California Los Angeles and has experience in executive marketing, product marketing, and project management roles in customer relationship management.

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