

# A More Walkable Nation

By Gabriel Lewenstein



The United States is in the midst of a walking revival. In cities across the country, new policies, infrastructure, and cultural shifts are changing the urban landscape and raising the profile of active transport. The result will be improvements to our health, safety, and streets.

According to the Alliance for Biking and Walking, 10.4 percent of trips nationwide, and 5 percent of commutes in the biggest cities are taken on foot. These are modest numbers, compared to many European cities, but up significantly from a decade ago, thanks to recent investments in sidewalks, crosswalks, and communities. However, as pedestrian improvements are gaining attention, many lower-income communities are being neglected.

Communities of all backgrounds and income levels deserve easy, walkable access to safe streets, vibrant neighborhoods, and local amenities. Today, the pedestrian fatality rate in low-income areas is nearly double that of high-income areas. Ten million households—just under 10 percent of American households—have no access to an automobile, and rely on walking, often to and from public transit, for their mobility. Now, communities across the country are working to integrate equity

and infrastructure and are developing strategies to address these concerns.

Engaging, accessible streets lead to thriving, connected communities. Whether the goal is better health, increased access to transit or jobs, or reduced injuries and deaths from traffic crashes, strong pedestrian infrastructure improves quality of life. Improvements can come in many forms: sidewalks can be widened, better lit, or shaded; streets can be redesigned, speed limits lowered, and intersections made safer through shorter crossings with better signage and crosswalks. Neighborhoods, too, can be made more walkable, by promoting a mix of commercial and residential uses, vibrant, street-level storefronts, and improving access to public transit [see sidebar].

In a recent report on the importance of walking, the United States Surgeon General proclaimed that “everyone should have access to spaces and places that make it safe and easy for us to

walk or wheelchair roll.” Encouragingly, American cities have started taking action. In the past decade, the number of major U.S. cities with an explicit policy to increase walking has risen from twenty-five to thirty-nine. One of the most popular policies, Vision Zero, has spread from New York to Chicago to San Francisco and beyond. Other urban centers, including, Washington, D.C., Boston, and Seattle have created new walking hot spots—areas with high marks on walkability indices as well as ample office and retail spaces—that are well distributed throughout the city.

Perhaps no place represents the shift in U.S. cities better than Detroit. For decades the center of American auto manufacturing, the city has recently turned the corner and is on track to become one of the top ten most walkable cities in the country in coming years, according to the Foot Traffic Ahead report from the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University School of Business. The change has been led by business executive and Detroit native Dan Gilbert. After Detroit’s economy famously collapsed in 2008, Gilbert began purchasing swaths of downtown

real estate, and is now a driving force behind rebuilding the city as an attractive, livable destination.

Detroit's improvements include a focus on active streets, with outdoor seating and ample ground-level retail, art, and public space. Support for and investment in a new light-rail line will allow more people to forgo a car and reach the city center. The results so far are encouraging. The city's score on walkability metrics has improved significantly in the past five years. The Foot



Traffic Ahead report examined walkable hot spots with strong commercial activity and projected that in the near future, Detroit will rank eighth in U.S. cities with abundant walkable urban space.

Despite the progress in recent years, a lack of investment in less wealthy neighborhoods is raising concerns about the role of equity in our pedestrian infrastructure. In the past, other forms of transit have conspicuously catered to middle- and upper-class areas, such as highways from downtowns to suburbs bisecting low-income communities and a lack of adequate transit in poor neighborhoods. Now, it is critical that the United States avoid similar mistakes as it builds up its pedestrian infrastructure.

Already, low-income Americans walk and bicycle more than their

upper-income counterparts, and with less infrastructure. The highest rates of walking to work, almost 8 percent, are seen among those making less than \$10,000 a year, with rates for all those making below \$25,000 close behind. Walkable neighborhoods can be especially important for low-income residents. Safe paths to transit allow access to jobs and opportunities throughout the city. Equally important is investing in commerce in low-income neighborhoods. A good sidewalk is useless if it leads nowhere. Nonetheless, while almost 90 percent of high-income urban areas nationwide have sidewalks, only 49 percent of low-income areas do.

Recent investments in public space have not always addressed these issues. For example, Miami has created more vibrant, walkable public spaces, but most of the improvements have come in already-affluent areas. After the housing market soured in the Great Recession, new condos that were originally intended for absentee foreign owners were instead rented to the city's burgeoning tech crowd. This led to more local residents, with active, busy streets. Several developers fostered this growth by creating new art galleries and high-end shopping centers. While these walkable hot spots benefit the city overall, the city's poorer communities have yet to see similar investments in their public space.

Nonetheless, some communities in the United States are taking the lead on these issues and adopting holistic approaches to equitable transport. In developing Portland, Oregon's Vision Zero program, advocates worked with low-income community groups to ensure that their concerns were integrated into the plan. When a street maintenance fee was proposed to fund transportation projects,

## What Makes a Walkable Neighborhood?

Walking is a key element of transit-oriented development. The TOD Standard lays out the principles that need to be considered to create a strong pedestrian environment:

### Principle: Walk

- A. The pedestrian realm is safe and complete, with both blocks and intersections having safe, accessible walkways
- B. The pedestrian realm is active and vibrant, with ample, engaging storefronts connecting to the street
- C. The pedestrian realm is temperate and comfortable, with shade and shelter where needed

### Principle: Connect

- A. Walking and cycling routes are short, direct, and varied
- B. Walking and cycling routes are shorter than motor vehicle routes

Vision Zero advocates stood with local communities to push for a less regressive tax. In addition, the Vision Zero report includes a call to end racial profiling, aiming to make sure that walkers of all races and backgrounds feel ownership over their streets, and have safe and inclusive public spaces.

The United States has a long way to go before it becomes a pedestrian paradise. Decades of car-oriented growth have left a planning legacy that can be challenging to overcome. But with more cities focused on attracting growth, jobs, and commerce downtown, active transport is becoming an increasingly central strategy. Benefits to personal health, community cohesion, and the regional economy mean that strong pedestrian infrastructure is an integral part of building a smart, modern city.

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