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Toronto's Deadly Car Crisis



A cyclist was hit and killed in Toronto. (Photo by Lucas Oleniuk of the Toronto Star)

Today, a 58 year old woman was killed almost right in front of my University of Toronto office. I love to ride. But recently I have just about stopped riding in Toronto because the streets are just too dangerous. There's a ghost bike around the corner from my home where another cyclist died. Twenty-one cyclists and pedestrians have died this year; 93 [have been killed](#) since Toronto launched its Vision Zero initiative roughly two years ago in June 2016.

No one seems to care. On my street, we had to fight for a stop sign to calm traffic and save lives. Without bike lanes, I've seen a child fall off the curb into the road. When a group of neighbors organized to make our street safer with bike lanes, traffic calming and stop signs, our progressive councillor and city staff told us our street was too narrow for bike lanes; busses could not fit

through and on-street parking was necessary; and oh, by the way, that stops signs do not calm traffic.

Torontonians like to sound off on Americans' inability to deal with guns and gun deaths. But Toronto's inability to deal with the car creates its own killing fields.

Today, more Torontonians [die](#) from being hit by cars than from being killed by guns. In 2016, nearly 2,000 pedestrians and 1,000 cyclists in the city were hit by cars. Of these, 43 resulted in fatalities. On average, a pedestrian in Toronto is hit every four or five hours, and a cyclist every eight or nine. This means that Toronto's rate of pedestrian deaths was 1.6 per 100,000 people in 2016 — worse than in Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, D.C., Portland, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, and Buffalo. It has risen to 1.7 deaths per 100,000 people in 2017 and is on track to rise still further to 1.8 deaths per 100,000 this year. And, children and the elderly face the greatest risk of being struck and killed by a car. The problem is only getting worse. Across Canada, pedestrian fatalities increased by more than 10 percent between 2010 and 2016; at time when they [decreased](#) by more than 25 percent in European countries like Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

In addition to its huge toll on lives and public safety, Toronto's dependence on the car generates enormous deadweight costs in terms of traffic and congestion, the city's car dependence limits the region's productivity and innovation, contributes to growing economic divides. The biggest issue facing Toronto today is its over-dependence on the car.

For more than half century, from the end of World War II to the turn of the millennium, the car formed the basis of a broad and powerful economic model. Appropriately dubbed "Fordism," this basic model spurred by the automobile and underpinned by highways, roads, and sprawling housing construction, had a basic economic rationale, spurring demand for assembly-line manufacturing, from the making of refrigerators, televisions and washing machines. In doing so, it helped to lift the wages of blue-collar workers and generate a new middle class.

That old model no longer fits our new economic reality. Today's new growth model is propelled by the clustering of knowledge, innovation, and talent. This new model turns on density and requires alternative means for moving people, goods, and ideas—from mass transit, light rail, and high-speed rail to cycling and walking. Indeed, places where higher shares of people use transit, bike, or walk to work have higher levels of education, knowledge workers, innovation, and high-tech industry. My [own research](#) shows that venture capital-financed startups, which once clustered in suburban office parks or "nerdistans," are now heavily concentrated in dense, transit-served urban areas.

The shift away from car dependence is especially critical in metropolitan areas that have [reached a population](#) of around five or six million people. At this point, the sprawling, outward-facing growth model based on the car begins to break down. Metros like Toronto, Boston, Washington, D.C., Miami, Atlanta, and Houston have become so bogged down in traffic that they literally come to halt. This is why so few cities in North America have been able to scale

successfully. Indeed, the cities that have been able to grow beyond their geographic threshold, such as New York and London, depend heavily on alternate modes of transportation to bring people closer to where they work.

With a population [projected to reach](#) roughly ten million by 2041, the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) has already surpassed its geographic limit. To scale beyond its current size, Toronto requires a new growth model based on more compact development, greater density, expanded public transit, and increased walkability.

The city and region's dependence on the car threatens our ability to grow and become a stronger more innovative and inclusive global city. Consider the following facts.

Across the GTA, more than 600,000 people, almost 70 percent of commuters, take their cars to work each day. Just a quarter take transit, only five percent walk to work, and a mere one percent use their bikes. By contrast, only half of the commuters in the New York metro drive to work, compared to 30 percent who use transit, 6 percent who walk, and less than 1 percent who bike.

The city of Toronto does better. Roughly half of its commuters use their cars, compared to 37 percent who take transit, 8.5 percent who walk, and just under three percent who bike. Still, Toronto has a long way to go before it can compare itself to leading global cities. In New York City, just a fifth of commuters drive alone to work, compared to nearly 60 percent who use transit and ten percent who walk. All in all, more than 80 percent of Manhattanites use a method of transportation other than the car to get to work. In Vienna, nearly two-thirds of workers use transit to get to work. And in cities like Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, and Barcelona, [40 or 50 percent](#) of people commute by bike.

Toronto's car dependence is a key factor in its deepening economic divides. In 1970, two-thirds of Torontonians lived in middle-class neighborhoods; By 2005, this number dropped to less than 30 percent, according to [research](#) from my University of Toronto colleague David Hulchanski. The city and region have divided into small clusters of concentrated advantaged in and around downtown and along transit lines, and much larger swathes of concentrated disadvantaged in the suburbs and exurban periphery. By virtue of their location, these disadvantaged areas remain disconnected from jobs, transit, and economic opportunity.

Toronto's car-dependent spatial structure hits hardest at the less advantaged. Across Canada, blue-collar workers have just [\\$26,400 left over](#) after paying for housing compared to \$45,000 for higher paid knowledge workers. The nation's service workers earn even less: \$11,500 a year after paying for housing. Indeed, car ownership is a key differentiator between families that are "savers" and those that are "spenders." A StatsCan [study](#) found that spender households devoted 54 percent more to transportation, on average, than saving households.



Lucas Duras, 3, protests removing a stop sign (Photo by Rana Florida)

Dependence on the car has also helped to shape the increasingly polarized politics of the city and region. Commuting by car, along with living in the suburbs, was one of the strongest factors in support for the late Toronto Mayor Rob Ford, according to [detailed research](#) by political scientist Zack Taylor. This is in line with research from Stanford University professor [Clayton Nall](#) which shows that investment in roads and an extensive interstate highway system has played a key role in America's highly polarized Red-Blue divide—and, by extension, the election of Donald Trump. Eight years later in Toronto and Ontario, the car—and the spatial structure it has enabled—stand at the root of our polarized electorate.

The car will once again be a key, and perhaps defining, factor in Toronto's upcoming mayoral election, putting pressure on candidates to build roads and speed up traffic instead of making critical investments in transit, cycling infrastructure, and pedestrian safety. The next mayor and council cannot succumb to these pressures.

For Toronto to continue to grow and scale, the city and region must put the car in its place.

For starters, Toronto's mayor and council must prioritize transit over roads. It should put aside any plans to rebuild the outmoded Gardiner Expressway. Not only is the projected \$2 billion cost outrageous, rebuilding the Gardiner will have little economic impact on the city and region. A huge research literature shows that building more roads and expanding existing ones only generates more traffic. In fact, it's time for a moratorium on new highway construction.

It's also time to make drivers pay the real price for the roads they use. This means expanding congestion pricing, essentially levying a fee on drivers for their use of roads and highways—especially in highly trafficked areas like the downtown core or congested highways. It also means doubling down on Mayor Tory's [plan to impose tolls](#) on the Don Valley Parkway and Gardiner Expressway, which was thwarted by suburban pressure on the provincial government.

Toronto must shift its strategic investment from roads to transit. The city cannot afford to make “field of dreams” like investments in structures like the Sheppard Line or Scarborough Subway. Instead, sensible transit and subway investments can relieve serious capacity problems downtown. Moving forward, the city must upgrade service on its entire transit network through expanded rapid transit and reduced headways on buses and streetcars.

Toronto must also shift its growth model toward taller, denser, more compact development, which will reduce car dependence by allowing more people to live closer to where they work and in doing so leverage additional investments in transit.

While it is true that Toronto has more cranes in the sky than other North American cities—with [more than 150](#) under construction in 2018—sprawl continues to reign in the region. Doug Ford made waves in his race for Premier by suggesting that the Greenbelt be opened to development—a position that was fortunately beaten back. Instead, the region must encourage denser development, not just in and around the core, but along subway and transit routes. As cities across North America build and densify in their cores, huge swathes of land in older suburbs have remained untouched by construction for around half a century. Already, the Province has taken an important step toward mitigating this issue by promising to upzone the areas around transit hubs in [December 2017](#).

Ultimately, there is the question of public safety. Toronto can no longer put cars and speed ahead of the safety of pedestrians, cyclists, and residents. To date, the city's “Vision Zero” has [done little to reduce](#) the death toll. In the future, the city must emulate the Bloomberg Administration's “[slow zones](#)” program by lowering speeds—especially on residential streets. It must also enable safer streets by adding pedestrian cross walks, red light cameras, and photo radar cameras in school zones and historically high-accident areas.

On top of this, Toronto desperately needs an integrated bike lane system to promote additional, safe cycling. The city and region's current bike infrastructure is disjointed, making it difficult for commuters to reach their offices in a single, streamlined trip. Many of the city's lanes are also unprotected, meaning they abut the street without any planters or posts separating them from traffic. Though the Toronto Bikeshare program is helping to make the city more connected, the city still requires a hazard-free way to commute to and from work.

To keep our stop sign, we had to have children's' protest. It's likely that when our road is rebuilt, they'll take that stop sign out. And, we've been told, because busses run on the street, and we need on-street parking, bike lanes are a non-starter. It's only a matter of time until someone gets mowed down in my neighborhood.

The car remains our most serious threat to public health and safety and an obstacle to sustainable growth and development. In her last book, [Dark Age Ahead](#), the ever-prescient Jane Jacobs [identified](#) the automobile as “the chief destroyer of American communities.” It is time her adopted home of Toronto heed that warning.

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