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Elderly pedestrians especially at risk on South Florida roads

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An elderly woman waits for the crosswalk sign, while a younger woman crosses a Little Havana street. Florida consistently ranks as the worst state for pedestrian safety. NICK SWYTER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Imagine trying to cross U.S. 1 on foot. Or West Flagler Street as it widens. Or the business corridor along 27th Avenue. Or the funnel that is one-way Calle Ocho. Actually, imagine any intersection of any multi-lane road. Cars whizzing by at frightening speeds. Lights turning green too quickly. Drivers gunning their engine.

It's scarier still if you're elderly – if your pace is slow, your eyesight poor and your ability to react to the unexpected compromised. Yet, that's the scenario many of South Florida's seniors face when they're walking to a bus stop or the grocery store.

The tri-county area, from Miami to West Palm Beach, consistently ranks among the worst nationwide

for pedestrians, and it can be especially tough for older walkers navigating a city that was built as a paean to the automobile. Dangerous by Design 2014, the latest report by activist groups the National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America, ranks South Florida as the nation's fourth most-dangerous metro area for pedestrians, with almost triple the average national rate for crashes involving people on foot.

Just last week 58-year-old Yvette Annette Wilson Hughes was hit while crossing Northwest 79th Street. Hughes, who was not walking in the crosswalk, had been trying to weave her way through cars before an eastbound SUV struck her. She went airborne and landed in the center lane, before being hit a second time by a Chevrolet Malibu, which dragged her about 5 to 10 feet. She is at Ryder Trauma Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital. Police are looking for the driver of a silver Hyundai SUV, who didn't stop.

In the Dangerous by Design report, South Florida scored 145.33 on the Pedestrian Danger Index, a complex computation that takes into account traffic fatalities and the number of people who walk to work. The national average is 52.2. Only three other metro areas — in order, Orlando, Tampa and Jacksonville — beat out this part of the state, making Florida the least pedestrian-friendly place in the country.

"In Florida we've always had this culture of driving. We built these sprawling cities with lots of broad avenues for speeding traffic and not much thought for pedestrians," said Marsha Jenakovich, director of planning and special projects at the Alliance for Aging, the nonprofit agency that handles elder issues in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. "We have to rethink the way we do things."

Older adults and other vulnerable groups, such as children and minorities, are disproportionately affected by pedestrian crashes. Though seniors 65 and over comprise 12.6 percent of the U.S. population, they account for almost 21 percent of pedestrian fatalities nationwide. Stated another way: Nationally, the pedestrian fatality rate for older adults is 3.19 per 100,000 people compared with 1.75 for those under 65. For those 75 and older, the fatality rate jumps to 3.96 per 100,000.

Florida's older pedestrian fatality rate stands at 3.92 per 100,000, higher than the national average but, lower than some other states. Hawaii, for instance, has an astonishing 9.75 deaths per 100,000 people.

But advocates say pedestrian safety transcends age. As America grows grayer and more densely populated, communities will have to accommodate a growing population of walkers, particularly those who have given up their car keys. Refusing to redesign streets, they add, will inevitably translate into a health crisis, with more pedestrian crashes and fatalities and seniors increasingly isolated in

their homes.

“We can’t put it off,” said Laura Cantwell, an associate state director for AARP. “This isn’t something that’s going to go away. Too many people are dying. We have to invest now for an aging America.”

Older adults have the highest risk of dying while on foot for the same reason more of them die in car crashes: they tend to be more physically fragile. Yet, many of them don’t have a choice but to walk to places. It is often their primary form of transportation. What’s more, “walking is more than about getting from one point to another,” Cantwell said. “It’s important for both health and social reasons. It gets them out moving and meeting people.”

A March 2011 report prepared for Miami-Dade’s public works department by the Lehman Center for Transportation Research at Florida International University cited high curbs, uneven pavements, narrow sidewalks, bad lighting and poorly labeled crosswalks at signalized intersections as impediments for elderly pedestrians. The “Traffic Safety Plan For Elderly Pedestrians” also identified the 10 most dangerous locations for older pedestrians in Miami-Dade, (<file:///C:/Users/jchrisos/Downloads/10%20Most%20Dangerous%20Intersections%20Report.pdf>) with a list of suggestions for improvement.

Some of these suggestions have already been implemented, said Antonio Cotarelo, deputy director of the county’s public works department. On West Flagler Street and 97th Avenue, the No. 1 intersection on the 2011 list, a midblock crosswalk has been installed, street lighting and signage updated and the sidewalk improved, Cotarelo said.

The department is well aware of the problems, he added, “but we are doing this on a case by case basis...as money becomes available.”

But is it enough?

“There’s been a gradual recognition of the problem,” said Stefanie Seskin, the lead author of the Dangerous by Design report. “But it’s been in incremental stages. This is the type of effort that requires strong political leadership.”

Government engineers can predict with some accuracy the dangerous “hot spots” for pedestrians. These crossings combine lots of cars, higher posted speed limits and plenty of foot traffic. For seniors they usually include a place where they typically congregate, whether it’s a doctor’s office or a bus stop. But hot spots can change with demographics and development. A quiet intersection can be transformed with a new senior center or a medical complex nearby.

Not surprisingly, 32 percent of Florida's pedestrian crashes occur at intersections, with Miami-Dade's rate being higher (36 percent) and Broward's slightly lower (31 percent). But it's the crashes at other locations that prove to be more confounding and frustrating to town planners. Last week's crash on Northwest 79th Street occurred mid-block, not at the crosswalk where Hughes, the victim, should've been.

But it's not just jaywalking that's a problem. A quarter of pedestrian crashes happen in parking lots.

"What we see happening in private parking lots is surprising," admitted Ramon Sierra, traffic engineer for the Florida Department of Transportation. "It's people not paying attention, not looking around."

Another third of pedestrian crashes happen in unmarked segments of a street. "As a driver, you're stopping for pedestrians at a crosswalk, but you don't expect someone to cross randomly," Sierra added.

It's not only speeding drivers and distracted pedestrians who share the blame for what are usually avoidable accidents, however. Safety advocates note our roads have been designed to move cars from Point A to Point B in the fastest way possible, with other forms of transportation relegated to an afterthought.

Seskin says Florida's metro areas share several details that "force pedestrians into very dangerous situations." These include wide streets, long blocks, few places to cross, many visitors from other places and retirees who settle here from elsewhere.

Victor Dover, a local urban planner and co-author of *Street Design: The Secret to Great Cities and Towns*, agrees, but he also believes a cultural shift in the way people move — and are being moved — is bringing about much-needed change.

"We're having a rebalancing and a refocusing of values," he said. "We're realizing this is important for human health and happiness."

There's also been a recognition that redesigning streets and sidewalks to accommodate seniors benefits pedestrians and cyclists of all ages. "When you ensure the safety of one group, you're making it safe for everybody," Dover said.

Even as Florida lags in pedestrian safety, Seskin's report commends the FDOT for responding to the bottom-of-the-barrel rankings by creating the state's Bicycle/Pedestrian Focused Initiative, which, in 2013, issued a comprehensive plan to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety and added full-time specialists to be shared among its district offices.

Sierra, the FDOT engineer, said the agency focuses on three E's – engineering, enforcement and education. Two FDOT-initiated programs, Safe Mobility for Life and Alert Today/Alive Tomorrow, have also been launched in the past few years, aiming to increase awareness and reduce injuries and fatalities on Florida's roads.

Another program, the Safe Routes to Age in Place, a partnership between the Health Foundation of South Florida, the Alliance for Aging, ReServe Miami, Urban Health Partnerships and Miami-Dade County, is using a Pfizer Foundation grant to foster accessible and safe transportation options for older adults. The Alliance for Aging also launched a Safe Steps-Pasos Seguros campaign.

Local governments have adopted Complete Streets, a nationwide initiative that promotes practices to ensure that streets are safe for different modes of transportation. Broward County has earmarked \$100 million for about 90 bike and pedestrian improvements in 12 municipalities in the next five years, said Ricardo Gutierrez, Broward's bicycle and pedestrian coordinator.

"This really started about 10 years ago," Gutierrez said, "when we began realizing we had to start moving people, not just cars. We had built out and we couldn't continue just building roads."

Miami-Dade also adopted Complete Streets policies last year but has not funded it.

While conceding change can't happen overnight, particularly in the current fiscal environment, Dangerous by Design author Seskin nonetheless calls on communities and governments to stop using money as an excuse and "prioritize investments. Look for where you can get more bang for your buck."

According to the Dangerous by Design report, more than 60 percent of all pedestrian fatalities nationwide occurred on roads with speed limits of 40 miles per miles or higher. In Florida, that figure was 73 percent, so many planners are calling for lower speed limits. Doing this would require more than re-posting speed-limit signs, however. Many streets would need to be redesigned and enforcement would have to become a priority.

For Dover, the investment is well worth it. "If you can pick one thing, it's rethinking the traveling speed of cars. We have to lower the speed because everything flows from that."

WAYS TO IMPROVE PEDESTRIAN SAFETY

- Lowering speed limits in designated roads where there's a high volume of pedestrian traffic.
- Widening sidewalks and bike lanes

- Installing more frequent crosswalks and signals on long blocks.
- Narrowing traffic lanes.
- Building larger medians, or installing refuge islands, for pedestrians to land if the light changes before they get to the other end.
- Lengthening crosswalk time at designated intersections, from the typical 20 seconds to 30.
- Limiting right turns on red.
- Enhancing all-red light crosswalks in high-pedestrian traffic areas so walkers can cross in any direction when a light changes.
- Improving crosswalk markings, including adding lighted crosswalks.
- Improving lighting along streets and walkways.
- Enforcing speed limits and other traffic laws consistently.
- Eliminating clutter, such as signs, trees and other distractions, to increase visibility for both walkers and drivers.
- Installing overpasses and underpasses.