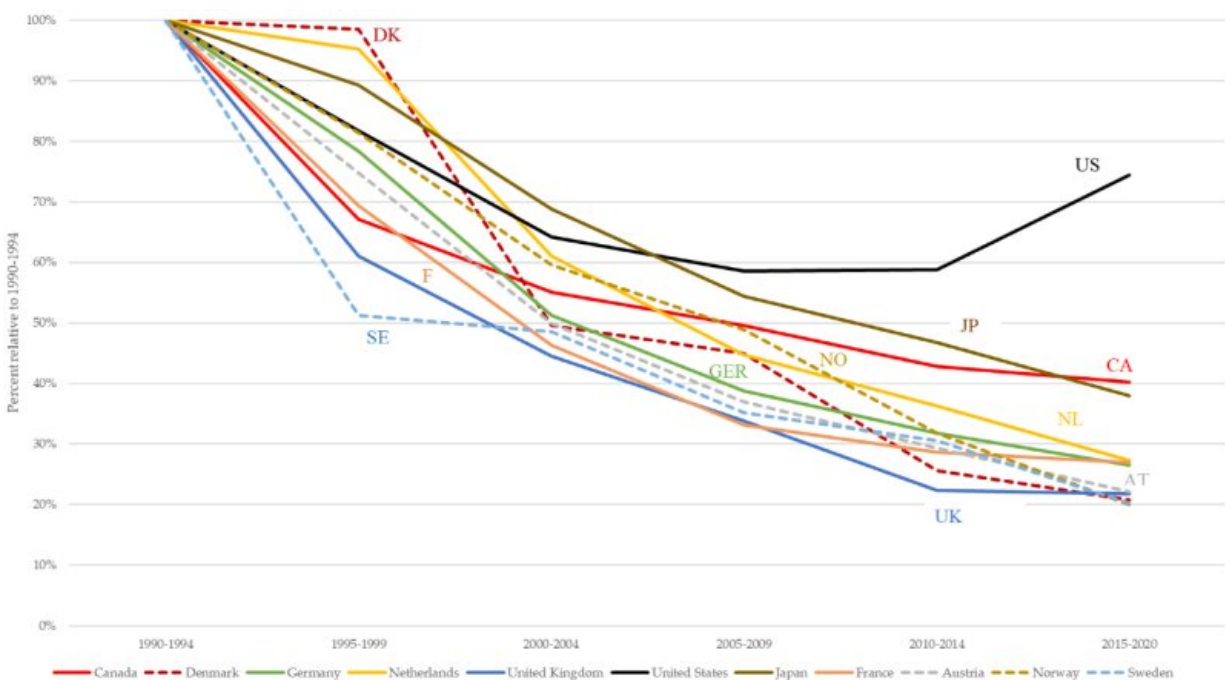


Americans walk less frequently and less safely compared to other countries, shows research

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Trend in pedestrian fatalities per 100,000 population relative to 1990. For each country the fatality rate for 1990–94 was set at 100% as base year. Credit: Graphic courtesy of Ralph Buehler.

A stroll through international statistics about walking reveals the grim reality of foot travel in the United States.

"People walk less in the United States because it's more dangerous to walk here and walking conditions are worse compared to other countries," said Ralph Buehler, professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech. "So we're caught in a bit of a spiral that discourages walking and encourages driving in the U.S."

For over a decade, Buehler and his co-authors have analyzed walking rates, [pedestrian safety](#), and [government policies](#) across multiple industrialized nations, cities within the same nation, and multiple sections of the same city. A recent article published in the journal *Sustainability* updates the findings from prior work published in [Transport Reviews](#), the [American Journal of Public Health](#), and [TRNews](#). The findings show that overall Americans walk less than individuals in many other countries while also having a higher walking fatality rate per kilometer walked.

"We were interested in figuring out how more people can walk while increasing pedestrian safety," said Buehler, who completed the project with John Pucher of Rutgers University. "Walking doesn't have to be a means of transport of last resort. There are tools and policies out there to make it safer and more attractive."

The researchers utilized a variety of government statistics, including travel surveys, national censuses, and traffic study databases, throughout their research. Their study also examines a variety of measures to increase pedestrian safety and the impact of those measures on walking rates.

According to the study, Americans make fewer than half of the walking trips per day compared to Britons, yet are about six times more likely to be killed while walking per mile traveled. Those disparities remain relatively consistent on both fronts when the U.S. is compared to several other European nations, including Germany, Denmark, and the

Netherlands.

The 11 countries studied from 1990–2020 all saw pedestrian fatalities per capita decrease over that span, but the numbers dropped substantially less in the U.S. Americans had a 26% decrease compared to 78% in the U.K., for example. More troubling, while other countries continued to improve pedestrian safety from 2010–20, the U.S. was the only country to have a rise—up 25%—in pedestrian fatalities.

"It's not only that walking is less safe in the U.S., the trends in walking safety are going in the wrong direction," Buehler said.

Other findings of the study include walking rates being highest for short trips, women having a higher walking rate than men, and walking rates generally decreasing as income levels increase. The U.S. is also an outlier in the latter category. Americans are the only group where the highest income bracket walked more than the middle class. The researchers say this is likely due to the gentrification of many central city areas since 2000, where walking is safe and convenient.

Buehler said the U.S. has a long history of creating policies that promote driving while restricting pedestrians.

"The U.S. invented the term, 'jaywalking,' it doesn't exist in most other languages," Buehler said. "The history is really fascinating because in the late 1890s and early 1900s, pedestrians were everywhere in the streets, but cars needed that space, so they sort of get pedestrians out of the streets with all these campaigns. And they were successful, of course, because no one today would say the street is a safe place for pedestrians."

And that mindset has guided much of the country's infrastructure planning as it has grown during the past century.

"We have designed our communities around the automobile, and a lot of our engineering guidelines for roads have been built to facilitate car movement," he said "Roadway designers don't want to delay vehicles, and, guess what, pedestrian-friendly amenities like crosswalks delay cars. It's not so much that the guidelines are purposefully anti-walking, they are pro-driving, but they do at the same time making walking less attractive."

Based on the successes of other countries, the study suggests steps governments could take to promote safe walking.

Steps toward better designs

A cultural shift that better prioritizes pedestrians during the roadway planning process is needed. This could include the incorporation of networks of clearly-marked, well-lit sidewalks and crosswalks and safety islands built into intersection corners and medians, as well as rethinking road placement and deemphasizing designing for speed.

"We in the U.S. walk less even though there are a large number of trips that would be short enough," Buehler said. "For example, Northern New Jersey has roughly the population density of the Netherlands, but it's been planned for cars. So across the street you can see your destination, but because in between there is a six-lane roadway with no crosswalk, it's very dangerous or impossible to get there."

Steps toward better land use

Along with more pedestrian-friendly street designs, thinking through the creation of more walkable communities should include revamping zoning laws and regulations to allow for more mixed-use spaces.

"The land use really matters," Buehler said. "If we keep defining

neighborhoods as places without corner stores, day cares, doctors' offices, and things of daily necessity, we're forcing people to drive because distance will be long and there really will not be a choice."

Steps toward better driving habits

Lower speed limits, enforced by both police and traffic cameras, as well as tightened laws related to drunk and distractive driving could greatly benefit safety for both drivers and walkers. Also needed is the revision of laws and their enforcement to put more responsibility on drivers.

"If a pedestrian gets hit, we often sort of blame the victim," Buehler said. "We have to put the responsibility of avoiding that on the people who operate the two-ton machines rather than the people who are walking and have no physical protection around them."

Steps toward better transportation education

Many countries with safer walking rates also have more restrictive driving regulations. Similar efforts, compounded with more proactive education programs related to both walking and driving for youth, could greatly increase the overall safety of both activities.

"One of the most dangerous jobs in the US is that of a crossing guard," Buehler said. "So it's very dangerous, even around schools, for kids to walk to schools. As a result, parents decide to drive them to school and then there are even more cars driving around those schools."

What steps can you take?

As the [warmer weather](#) makes walking more attractive, it also provides an opportunity to play a critical role in making communities safer for foot travel.

"People who are out and walk daily, they know about dangerous situations, they know about the sidewalk missing links, they know about the traffic signals that don't work," Buehler said. "They have to talk to their local politicians, their town and city engineers, because what we're finding again and again is those folks don't really know what's out there."

More information: Ralph Buehler et al, Overview of Walking Rates, Walking Safety, and Government Policies to Encourage More and Safer Walking in Europe and North America, *Sustainability* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/su15075719](https://doi.org/10.3390/su15075719)

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