

The Advocates Scholarship, Fall 2025 Essay

Growing up in the suburbs of Dallas and subsequently living to some extent in every other metropolitan area of Texas, bicycling can be chalked up to either something that is done for recreational sport at a part or a nightmare form of transportation for those unfortunate not to own a car. The lack of pedestrian-centered infrastructure in Texas is largely designed to accommodate the state's major industries including petroleum extraction and refining, construction and concrete, and automobile manufacturing. While not necessarily malicious, it is systematic, coercing everyday people to spend money on a house in the suburbs, invest in a car and associated costs, and embark on a potentially dangerous commute every day. Bicycles are an efficient and cost-effective alternative to cars, and if cities can be designed in a way that accommodates pedestrian safety, Texas can see great progress and become a model for other states.

Accidents between bicyclists and motorists can generally be linked to two structural problems: poor engineering and poor education of road rules. Regarding poor engineering, as mentioned, streets (stroads) around the United States are designed to maximize automobile capacity and cater to drive-through businesses, which have been criticized for economic waste, as this setup largely stymies foot traffic and consumption by pedestrians.¹ The second problem, the lack of communication of road rules for bicyclists, is compounded by a lack of codification of bike laws. Empirically, there is a focus on a driver's responsibility, but a lack of focus on a bicyclist's responsibility, with many laws implying that bicycles need to follow the same rules and use the same infrastructure as automobiles, although these vehicles have different functions and abilities.

There have, however, been movements pushing for reforms, and gradual progress has been achieved. Give the example of Texas again, where the city of Austin has been following the "complete streets" doctrine, where protected bicycle lanes are built with most major downtown street improvement projects.² Austin has also done an excellent job in connecting different trails and linking them with public transit, keeping bicyclists on a connected route and out of traffic.³ Additionally, the Project Connect initiative has linked bicycle routes and pedestrian infrastructure with the new train lines constructed.⁴ Finally, Austin has been increasing its signage for bicyclists, informing of safe routes with minimal traffic and about road rules, such as bicycle lane directions. To this point, bicyclists are allowed to use the pedestrian crosswalk signal as opposed to traffic lights, demonstrating the city's commitment to legislate and engineer for the ability of bicyclists versus automobiles.⁵

The dangers posed to bicyclists are ultimately structural, but following the examples of cities like Austin and applying them to other currently car-centric cities can create great progress. It is important to not let perfection impede progress, so activities like riding one's bicycle more, participating in city council meetings, and pushing for patchwork reforms to achieve a bigger picture can improve safety, spread awareness, and, by extension, promote public health through exercise.

¹ Zoabe Hafeez, "Driving Progress: Health and Economic Effects of Arterial Thoroughfare Design," Baker Institute.

² Smart Growth America, "Complete Streets," <https://smartgrowthamerica.org/what-are-complete-streets/>.

³ Jack Flagler, "Austin Awarded \$10.5 Million Federal Grant for Pedestrian Safety Citywide," City of Austin.

⁴ Tan Radford, "Austin's Light Rail: Project Connect Shows Off Updated Plans," Fox 7 Austin.

⁵ Ali Mozdbar, "Traffic Signal Features for Pedestrians and Bicyclists," Austin Transportation Department

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