

WASHINGTON STATE

STRATEGIC HIGHWAY SAFETY PLAN 2024



Zero Deaths and Zero Serious Injuries by 2030

1.4 EQUITY FRAMEWORK

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) describe transportation as an important social determinant of health that “affects the ability of people to move efficiently and safely through public and private spaces. Active transportation—specifically walking, cycling, and rolling—has direct and indirect impacts on health at both individual and community levels.”¹ However, individuals using the transportation system experience significantly different outcomes related to death and serious injury. Some of these differences are attributable to lack of investment in segregated communities, defined by redlining policies that were put in place nearly a century ago in cities across the U.S.

Land use decisions are often skewed in favor of some interests over others. Underinvestment becomes institutionalized, and the negative effects have become worse over time. This produced neighborhoods with higher speed arterials and a lack of street lighting, sidewalks, protected/separated bike lanes, and pedestrian crossing locations.

CDC researchers concluded: “lower-income neighborhoods often lack sidewalks or have poorly maintained sidewalks with limited connectivity. Structural racism has governed the trajectories of communities across the United States, creating multidecade place-based effects. These effects are often not acknowledged as a fundamental cause of transportation inequities. Individually focused behavioral countermeasures and siloed infrastructure projects cannot sufficiently address present-day inequities. Transportation researchers must understand and address upstream factors—like redlining—that continue to undermine positive population-level transportation

outcomes.” Understanding the structural inequality underlying unsafe land use planning and road placement is important for selecting safety strategies and countermeasures that address the root causes contributing to serious injury and fatal crashes. A recent example is WSDOT’s use of a social equity index to understand the correlation between equity characteristics and vulnerable road user crashes, as outlined in **Appendix D**.

The equity framework for achieving Target Zero is based on an understanding that interconnections among public policies for transportation, health, housing, and environment have resulted in inequities. Marginalized communities face disproportionate burdens and impacts that were created by policy makers and funders across these systems, including higher rates of roadway deaths for American Indian, Alaska Native, and Black road users.

Inequity in systems also occurred in part because transportation funders, policy makers, and design practices prioritized higher-speed, vehicle-oriented mobility through marginalized communities. As these systems were built decades ago, safety was defined as a reduction in total crashes (versus fatal and serious injury crashes). Congestion-related vehicle crashes were prioritized. These crash types usually resulted in property damage or minor injuries, versus less frequent but higher severity crashes.

1 Taylor, N.L., et. al. (2023). [Structural racism and pedestrian safety: Measuring the association between historical redlining and contemporary pedestrian fatalities across the United States, 2010-2019](#).

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Projects were often developed to reduce cost and complexity, leading decision makers to place roadways near or through marginalized neighborhoods, instead of other locations that were perceived as more valuable and/or more difficult to build in. These projects were built without places for the people in those same neighborhoods to walk, bike, and roll, resulting in negative effects on safety, culture, economic vibrancy, and personal security.

The current transportation system and network was built over decades, and it will take time to make changes to meet the needs and expectations of today. An equitable approach to transportation safety requires us to:

- Disaggregate data by population demographics such as race/ethnicity, income, housing, disability, English proficiency, other equity-related factors, and mode use to gauge existing and potential negative impacts within traditionally underserved populations.
- Understand how limited transportation options within different road design and operational context might affect transportation behaviors, and how to consider these factors in safety projects and programs.
- Address any differences in land use policy that led to underinvestment and disparate impacts for some demographic groups.
- Increase the effectiveness of traffic enforcement while eliminating disparities in its application. Focus efforts statewide on crash-causing driving behaviors and deemphasize low-risk infractions.
- Improve land use policy, infrastructure project selection, and transit access with a focus on historically underinvested communities.
- Include affected communities in transportation decision-making.

Land Use. Historical inequities in city planning led to inequitable zoning laws and practices, including housing segregation via redlining and exclusionary zoning. These policies led to the concentration of certain populations, particularly communities of color, in specific neighborhoods. The lack of transportation investment meant limited access to transportation, food, employment, health care, education, and recreation within a reasonable distance, further exacerbating existing inequities.

Marginalized people, who are most in need of affordable and reliable transportation options, may be the least likely to have these options in their neighborhoods due to lack of investment and roadways designed solely for the automobile. The lack of investment in transportation options increases their exposure to conditions that may result in roadway crashes. The outcome is a perpetuating cycle of poverty and inequity.



Equity in Transportation Policy

Transportation investments that rectify past inequities would result in improved public health, access to jobs, workforce development, and environmental justice. Recent legislation in Washington, described below, provides an opportunity to invest in a more equitable approach.

HEAL Act. The passage of the Healthy Environment for All (HEAL) Act is the first statewide law in Washington to create a coordinated state agency approach to environmental justice. It prioritizes voices from disproportionately impacted communities to reduce disparities in health, safety, and quality of life.¹

Complete Streets. The Move Ahead Washington transportation package passed in 2022 introduced a mandate for consideration of Complete Streets approaches in all significant transportation projects undertaken by WSDOT on state highways. Projects must consider and accommodate all road users and their modes of transportation, including walking, rolling, and using transit. While the directive applies to WSDOT projects, many other agencies around the state have adopted a local Complete Streets ordinance and are applying these principles to their transportation projects.²

Growth Management Act. In 2023 the legislature adopted several changes to the Growth Management Act that embed equity and transportation safety (HB 1181, 2023). These changes reduce potential crash exposure through support for transportation-efficient land use planning and mode shift.³

1 [WSDOT Environmental Justice](#)

2 [WSDOT Complete Streets](#)

3 [WSDOT Land Use and Transportation Planning](#)

Changes included:

- Requiring use of multimodal level of service standards for roads, transit service, and active transportation, which shifts from a driving-centered evaluation to one that considers all modes.
- Explicitly incorporating requirements to plan for safety. “Priority must be given to inclusion of transportation facilities and services providing the greatest multimodal safety benefit to each category of roadway users for the context and speed of the facility.”
- Adding equity language, for example directing jurisdictions to identify system needs to equitably meet current and future demands and to equitably implement the multimodal network.
- Adding a requirement that local jurisdictions must include Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) transition plans.

Equity in the Safe System Approach

To implement the Safe System Approach equitably, must understand the causes of disparities in roadway safety outcomes, and makers must prioritize transportation investments in marginalized communities.

Our work to reduce crashes must include engaging the community so that we understand their needs. This requires communicating with non-English speakers, developing culturally relevant materials, and establishing platforms and engagements to hear from those who are unable to participate in public meetings because of costs, inability to travel longer distances easily or at all, caregiving responsibilities, and other factors.

Socioeconomic and Demographic Factors in Washington

Within Washington, urban, suburban, and rural areas of the state exhibit substantial differences related to how people travel. Several state and national datasets that are helpful in identifying communities that experience persistent poverty (USDOT Areas of Persistent Poverty), are disadvantaged (USDOT Disadvantaged Communities score), are socially vulnerable (the CDC Social Vulnerability Index), or experience environmental health disparity (Washington Department of Health [WA DOH] Environmental Health Disparities Score). WA DOH provides online maps to visually communicate data on social, health, and safety vulnerabilities by census tract.¹

Responsibility for road design, construction, maintenance, enforcement, post-crash care, and safety is divided among city, county, state, and federal jurisdictions and Tribal nations. County roads account for the greatest number of road miles, yet they often exhibit the least funding investment per mile. State and county roads in unincorporated areas are those that most frequently cross and abut Tribal lands.



¹ [Washington Tracking Network](#)

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The CDC Social Vulnerability Index considers multiple factors in four domains:



HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION AND DISABILITY

- POPULATION 65+ (%)
- POPULATION UNDER 18 (%)
- POPULATION WITH A DISABILITY (%)
- SINGLE PARENT HOUSEHOLD (%)



SOCIOECONOMIC DETERMINANTS

- MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME
- NO HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA (%)
- POPULATION 19 TO 64 WITH NO HEALTH INSURANCE
- POPULATION LIVING IN POVERTY (%)
- UNEMPLOYED (%)



HOUSING TYPE AND TRANSPORTATION

- HOUSING WITH 10+ UNITS (%)
- MOBILE HOMES (%)
- NO ACCESS TO A PRIVATE VEHICLE (%)
- OVERCROWDED HOUSING (%)
- POPULATION LIVING IN GROUP QUARTERS (%)



RACE, ETHNICITY, AND LANGUAGE

- LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (LEP)
- PEOPLE OF COLOR (RACE/ETHNICITY)

People in historically marginalized, segregated, and underinvested census tracts in Washington also experience higher rates of serious injuries and fatalities in traffic crashes.

Individuals with lower incomes are increasingly forced to find lower-cost housing far outside of population centers. As a result, they must travel farther to get to their workplaces, schools, medical care, shopping, and other locations as part of their daily lives. This added distance creates

additional exposure due to miles traveled to reach these locations on facilities that may lack safety features found on other roadways.

Others who are not able to afford a personal vehicle are more likely to walk, bike, or roll, either as their primary mode or to access public transit. This leaves them more vulnerable and exposed to a higher likelihood of crashes that are more serious when they occur.

Community Concerns: A Delicate Balance to Achieve Road Safety Outcomes

One of the challenges we must address is a perception that enforcement of traffic laws is in conflict with the goals of equity. For enforcement to be most effective, it needs to be equitably applied, which means that law enforcement focuses on deterring high-risk behaviors. Some community members experience encounters with law enforcement as risky or dangerous.

Traffic stops are the most common way in which members of the public encounter law enforcement. Historic disparities in traffic stops and arrests in communities of color in Washington and the United States must be addressed when we engage these communities around behavioral traffic safety, which has traditionally relied upon traffic enforcement (and the related threats of fines or arrest) as a primary deterrent and countermeasure.

While a substantial majority of Washingtonians see effective traffic enforcement as essential to maintaining safer roads, groups that have historically experienced the greatest disparities in the criminal justice system expressed lower support for traffic enforcement on the Statewide Traffic Safety Survey (2023). The level of support is lower among Black survey respondents, 54% expressed support for enforcement of distracted driving laws for using a cell phone, and 60% expressed support for enforcement of laws against driving under the influence of alcohol. Support for enforcement of speed laws among Black respondents—specifically for driving 10 or more miles over the

“Traffic crashes are a legacy of colonization. We did not ask for these roads.”

*—Tribal Representative, October 2023,
Target Zero Listening Session*

posted limit—was 43% (37% were opposed and 20% were neutral). This occurred even though Black respondents were more likely to view speeding as very dangerous or extremely dangerous (43% versus 35% of all other respondents).

Deep and ongoing engagement and continued law enforcement training will be essential to craft and implement effective strategies in disproportionately affected communities. Equitable enforcement practices are likely to be more effective, as enforcement should focus solely on preventing, reducing, and disrupting the most dangerous behaviors on the road. Research in Connecticut,¹ North Carolina,² and elsewhere has shown that serious traffic crashes and fatalities can be decreased, along with racial disparities in traffic stops, when law enforcement agencies use data to focus officers’ attention on high-risk locations and high-risk driver behaviors.

1 https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w32692/w32692.pdf

2 <https://injejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-019-0227-6#Sec1>

Advancing Equity to Save Lives

It will take time, effort, patience, and mutual understanding to engage affected communities around solutions that effectively address disparities in social vulnerability, under-investment, enforcement actions, and the steps to provide roadway safety to everyone.

Addressing the most harmed populations in our society will reinforce Washington's commitment to zero fatalities and serious injuries for everyone. Today's transportation and community safety leaders must address the negative legacy created by prior systemic choices and take action to avoid burdening more people and places with similar decisions today and in the future. We cannot reach Target Zero without correcting these disparities so the system provides benefits to all.



Enforcement and Equity

Washingtonians clearly want effective and equitable enforcement of traffic laws. Multiple research studies have found that law enforcement policies and practices can be applied in ways that increase safety, reduce crime, and reduce racial disparities.

The Washington State Patrol (WSP) employs enforcement strategies and trains its troopers to operate in ways that are consistent with these methods, including:

- Using real-time crash and crime data to proactively deploy troopers to high-risk areas where they focus on high-risk driving behaviors, such as speeding, distraction, and impairment by alcohol or drugs.
- Using extensive public outreach before, during, and after high-visibility patrols (HiVE) so that the public is aware of these efforts and where they are happening. This approach is proactive and preventative, providing motorists the opportunity to follow traffic laws and avoid stops and citations. WSP reports the outcomes of these patrols by district so that the public is aware of their impact.
- WSP training dictates that troopers are to provide an introduction first during their initial contact with a motorist followed by a brief explanation of why the motorist was being contacted. Research indicates that notifying Black motorists for the reason they were stopped by law enforcement can reduce the likelihood of escalation into an arrest or use of force by 2.5 times.¹

¹ [Escalated police stops of Black men are linguistically and psychologically distinct in their earliest moments](#), PNAS, 2023