

There's no better time for cities to take space away from cars

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Closing certain streets to car traffic can help promote social distancing during the coronavirus pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for cities to remake their streets by taking space away from cars and giving it to pedestrians and bicyclists — permanently.

With public transportation ridership cratering, demand for Uber and other ride-hailing services fizzling, and people everywhere looking to get the hell off their couches and feel a little bit of breeze on their skin, the time for cities to take a bold stand against cars and parking is undeniably now.

WHY NOT LET PEOPLE
WALK IN THE STREET?

Rapidly building out a network of protected bike lanes would let residents — especially those under “shelter in place” rules — use their bikes for necessary trips to the drugstore or supermarket, while also avoiding public transportation. Closing certain streets to car traffic can also [help promote social distancing](#), since it’s undeniably easier to maintain six feet of recommended distance from someone else when you’re not confined to a narrow sidewalk. People are pouring into parks to get exercise and get some fresh air, making it more difficult for cities to control large gatherings and adhere to social distancing. Why not let them walk in the street?

In the midst of a pandemic, the need to fight inactivity is greater than ever. Last week, a group of nearly 50 academics and experts on public health and transport [wrote an open letter to the UK government](#) urging elected officials to encourage walking and biking amid the crisis. And you can’t do that without taking space away from cars.

That’s not the only benefit to us right now. By making cities less car-friendly, we could potentially cut the number of people who have to go to the ER when the health care system is overwhelmed: it’s harder to get into a life-threatening car crash if there are restrictions on driving.

Some cities have already started making these changes. The Colombian capital, Bogota, is adding 47 miles of bike lanes to reduce crowding on public transport and help prevent the spread of COVID-19 — as well as to improve air quality. New York City, which has witnessed [a surge in cycling](#) as people avoid public transportation, has said it would install bike lanes on 2nd Avenue between 34th and 42nd streets in Manhattan and Smith Street in Brooklyn. [Mexico City](#) is considering a fourfold increase to its cycling network.

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We're already seeing some early evidence of what happens when cities don't do enough to promote these healthier, low-carbon forms of transportation during the pandemic. Cyclist injuries in New York City were up 43 percent between March 9th and March 15th, according to NYPD statistics [obtained by Streetsblog](#). This came after NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio urged people to bike to work but did not build any new protected infrastructure to handle the surge of riders. On Sunday, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo [gave the city 24 hours](#) to come up with a plan to deal with overcrowding in parks that he said should include closing some streets to car traffic.

IT'S HARDER TO GET INTO A LIFE-THREATENING CAR CRASH IF THERE ARE RESTRICTIONS ON DRIVING

Many of these measures are temporary, meaning they can easily be removed as soon as the pandemic subsides. This would be a mistake. The coronavirus pandemic has already changed many of our personal habits related to work and social interaction. It's an opportunity for a different way of thinking about urban design and planning as well.

Air quality is another argument against giving space back to cars as soon as the pandemic subsides. Satellite imagery that detects carbon emissions due to car and truck traffic has shown [huge declines over major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Seattle, Chicago, and Atlanta](#). Cities can help slow the inevitable increase in carbon emissions by permanently restricting private cars from certain streets.

Car-free streets were on their way to [becoming somewhat of trend](#) before the coronavirus emerged to disrupt, well, everything. The rapid increase in cycling and scootering in the US, spurred in some part by the emergence of shared mobility startups, has forced some cities to build protected bike lanes in order to curb a rise in injuries.

AIR QUALITY IS ANOTHER ARGUMENT FOR TAKING AWAY SPACE FROM CARS PERMANENTLY

Likewise, the spike in traffic congestion as a result of ride-sharing services like Uber and Lyft has resulted in laws limiting the amount of time drivers cruise for passengers. Both of these phenomena have also helped build support for closing streets to car traffic in order to ensure buses can maintain normal service. The two most prominent examples in the US have been the 14th Street busway in Manhattan and Market Street in San Francisco. Both have proven to be extremely popular right out of the gate.

Taking space away from cars — whether it's by closing streets to traffic or removing on-street parking to build protected bike lanes — is almost always a controversial decision. Elected officials typically turn a blind eye, fearful of being yelled at by car

owners, protested, or even sued. They are wary of making such radical decisions, thinking it will cost them political support.

But those officials are ignoring the [grim realities that exist in the US today](#). In 2018, vehicle drivers killed the most number of pedestrians — 6,283 — in 30 years. Cyclists are also being run over and killed at an alarming rate: 857 were killed in 2018, an increase over the previous year of 6.3 percent.

While people stay home during the coronavirus pandemic, there have been a lot fewer traffic jams. But just because there are fewer drivers on the road doesn't make things inherently safer when the people who are still driving are doing it without caution. There's already been some [anecdotal](#) evidence that some drivers see these clearer lanes of traffic as an excuse to speed or drive recklessly.

We can't sit back and let our cities become set pieces for *Fast & Furious*-style hijinks. Every car crash that results in an injured driver or pedestrian will mean shifting precious hospital resources away from caring for those with COVID-19. Cities that take that space away from cars and refuse to give it back can ensure fewer injuries, better air quality, and a more vibrant way of life for everyone.