



Chicago among safest U.S. cities for pedestrians

BY ROSALIND ROSSI Transportation Reporter May 20, 2014 11:20PM

Pedestrians cross at State and Randolph Streets in Chicago. | Michael Schmidt/Sun-Times

Pedestrians are less likely to be killed in traffic accidents in the Chicago area than in most of the nation's big cities, a new study indicates.

The Chicago area came in No. 45 among the country's 51 largest metro areas for pedestrians killed per 100,000 residents over five years, from 2008 to 2012, according to the study, titled "Dangerous by Design 2014," which was released this week.

Chicago is "one of the safer cities and metro areas in the country," said Stefanie Seskin, deputy director of the National Complete Streets Coalition.

"We are definitely on the safer end of things nationally, but when you look at the number of [Chicago area] pedestrian lives lost — more than 1,100 in 10 years — that's a pretty sobering number. There's still a way to go."

While the number of car occupants killed in crashes has been declining, pedestrian traffic fatalities nationally have risen every year since 2007, the study by the National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America found. More than 47,000 people on foot were killed by vehicles in the decade ending in 2012.

The issue has prompted local anti-traffic-fatality campaigns. After three pedestrians were killed in just one night while walking on New York City streets this year, Mayor Bill De Blasio set a "Vision Zero" goal of no fatalities or serious injuries by car crashes.

He was two years behind Chicago in doing so. In 2012, then-Chicago Department of Transportation Commissioner Gabe Klein included a goal of zero traffic fatalities by 2020 in his 2012 "Chicago Forward" plan.

It called for 20-mph zones in all city residential areas, as well as more mid-block crossings, refuge street "islands" and crosswalks. Other elements: giving pedestrians signalized head-starts ahead of cars at intersections; more pedestrian countdown clocks at signal lights; speed cameras around parks and schools; and continued red light camera speed enforcement.

Since then, city pedestrian fatalities have dropped from 47 in 2012 to an estimated 29 in 2013, said CDOT spokesman Pete Scales. "We're starting to make headway," Scales said.

According to the Dangerous by Design study, the top four metro areas — based on the pedestrian fatality rate per 100,000 population in the five years ending 2012 — were all in Florida. The Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater area topped the list at No. 1. It saw 2.97 pedestrian deaths annually per 100,000 residents, compared to the Chicago metro area's 1.03 deaths.

Seniors were not “over-represented” among Florida fatalities despite the seniors that gravitate to that state, said one Florida State Department of Transportation official. Instead, Billy Hattaway of the Florida transportation department attributed the problem to streets built after World War II, when planners focused more on moving cars than moving people. As a result, he said, many swift-moving, wide arterial roadways were created in Florida; those roads can be challenging for pedestrians to cross.

The Los Angeles metro area came in No. 11 and the New York metro area came in No. 13. The safest of all 51 metro areas studied: Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Seskin attributed the Chicago metro area's showing to a city plan that included a lot of sidewalks for pedestrians, a bevy of transit options that reduce the number of cars on the road, and a grid system of right-angled arterial and side streets designed to move traffic efficiently.

“We definitely benefit from having sidewalks almost everywhere and having a great grid. That's something that Los Angeles doesn't have — and lots of other cities don't have,” Seskin said. And Seskin said, the more people who do walk — to transit, work or commerce — the safer it becomes to walk on city streets. Said Seskin: “It's called safety in numbers.”

The study used “metro” areas as defined by the U.S. Census, so the Chicago metro area included Naperville, Joliet, and portions of Indiana and Wisconsin.