



Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America

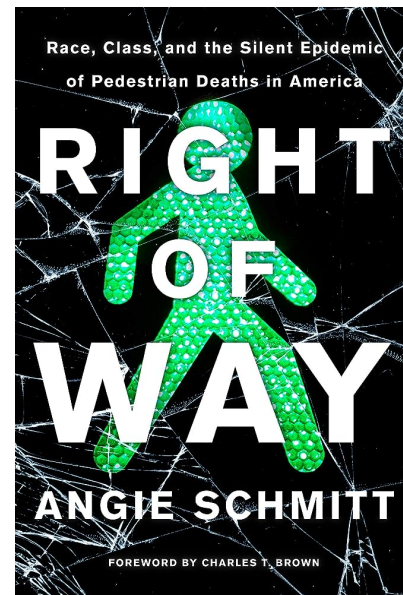
By Angie Schmitt

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Nov. 1, 2023 to discuss *Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America* by Angie Schmitt. Schmitt is a journalist and former editor at Streetblog who lives in Cleveland. She has a masters degree in urban planning.

In the book, Schmitt writes about the sudden rise of pedestrian deaths in America, what causes these fatalities, and why some countries in Europe are seeing the opposite, a decline in auto-related injuries and deaths.

Basically, she says, this “silent epidemic” is the result of three forces. First, the increased number of SUVs (sport utility vehicles), which ride so high that drivers have trouble seeing pedestrians and do much greater harm when they strike people. Second is the movement of poor families to suburbs, whose streets and roads were not designed for people walking to bus stops and grocery stores. Third is a long-standing neglect of pedestrian infrastructure, in part, she writes, because state departments of transportation—and even some city DOTs—do not see pedestrian safety as part of their mission.

What are the results? In 2018 there were 6,283 pedestrian deaths caused by motor vehicles, a 50 percent increase since the mid-1990s and greater “than at any point in a generation,” Schmitt writes.



Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five “big ideas” drawn from *Right of Way* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. The Georgia Department of Transportation must assume responsibility for pedestrian and cyclist safety and change the design of its roads in urban areas to assure pedestrians’ safety.
2. We need cities to invest in pedestrian infrastructure and public transit. The goal should be to reduce the danger of motor vehicles and reduce the presence of cars in urban streets. The book has ideas from other cities about how to do this. Our cities will need the state’s assistance in finding the financial resources for these investments.
3. Suburbs should redevelop their most dangerous highways as walkable, mixed-use districts. This will not only save lives; it will turn these bleak corridors into desirable places to live and work.
4. As suburbs do this, we need to document their successes so other municipalities can learn from them. One corridor whose transformation would be especially notable would be Buford Highway in DeKalb County.
5. We need advocacy groups that can speak to citizens about the problems of pedestrian safety and the opportunities for safe, walkable cities and suburbs, pressure governments to act, and document successes. Without focused, persistent, creative and knowledgeable advocacy, little will happen.

Why Do These Things?

Schmitt documents the pedestrian safety crisis. But should Urban Atlanta’s cities and the state DOT take on this problem? We think so. Here’s why:

- Because it will save lives, and because we know how to do it, thanks to what has been learned about road design and pedestrian infrastructure in New York and in European cities.
- With slower streets and better pedestrian infrastructure, many people may choose to walk rather than drive to stores and other attractions. But some would benefit disproportionately from safer walks. Among them are children who walk or cycle to school and to visit neighborhood friends.
- Another group that would benefit would be disadvantaged citizens, including the poor and immigrants.
- Converting high-speed roads to slower, safer, more walkable places would be good for land values. This could be a great opportunity for suburbs.
- Walkable urban areas tend to have less obesity, which is good for people’s health.
- They are also good for the environment.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile changes create opposition. That’s true even for something as desirable as improving pedestrian safety and encouraging walking. So our members discussed the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- This will require a major change in beliefs and practices at the Georgia Department of Transportation and among some local decision makers.
- Some of the bad practices—such as the DOT’s focus on traffic efficiency at the expense of pedestrian safety—are written into road-design guidelines. It would take convinced and committed leadership at the DOT to change these things.
- Auto design is unfortunately headed the wrong way. The book explains how the growth of SUVs has made streets and road less safe. Electric vehicles will not help with this. In fact,

they may add new dangers, as EVs accelerate faster than cars with gasoline motors, and they're quieter. So pedestrians may not hear one that's nearby.

- We may lack advocates in Urban Atlanta who are willing and able to champion the changes needed for pedestrian safety.
- One result of the absence of effective advocacy is that drivers' needs are often seen by citizens and decision makers as more important than those of pedestrians, cyclists, schoolchildren and residents who cannot cross a street safely. The book has numerous examples of pedestrians who were blamed for their own deaths after being struck by cars.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- We need advocates who can help us value pedestrians and their safety and understand the social and personal value of walking.
- One way: Roadside memorials that mark places pedestrians died, similar to the "ghost bikes" that show us where cyclists were killed.
- Among the tasks for effective advocacy:
 - Identify the worst roads for pedestrian deaths in the Atlanta area and explain why they are dangerous.
 - Explain how these terrible roads could be made safer and become prosperous, thriving walkable areas, using a variety of approaches that DOT and city officials could employ.
- Advocates could work with reporters to help them see the "hidden epidemic" that Schmitt writes about and use more accurate language to describe the death of pedestrians.
- As they do these things, pedestrian safety activists should link their efforts to affordable housing, transit, public health and other urbanist concerns, thus building a larger coalition for change.
- Activists could identify ways cities could finance road changes, build pedestrian infrastructure and expand transit usage. This may require state legislative action.
- Finally, activists are fighting long-held beliefs about driving—including that only cars and trucks belong on city streets. One way of changing these beliefs is by helping leaders and citizens understand the value of pedestrians, who bring great economic benefit to urban areas at very little cost in infrastructure and land use, unlike automobiles.

A Synopsis of *Right of Way*

Right of Way is 179 pages, not including acknowledgements, notes, forward and author's note. It has 10 chapters, an introduction and a conclusion.

Schmitt is a journalist. Her book is about the rise of pedestrian deaths in America, what causes these fatalities, and how we could make streets and roads safer for people on foot.

As mentioned above, Schmitt writes that this "silent epidemic" is a result of three forces. First is the increased number of SUVs (sport utility vehicles), which ride so high that drivers have trouble seeing pedestrians and do much greater damage when they strike people. Second is the movement of poorer families out of cities and into suburbs that were not designed for walking. Third is a long-standing lack of pedestrian infrastructure that could make both urban and suburban streets safer. Partly, Schmitt writes, this is because state and even some city departments of transportation do not see pedestrian safety as part of their mission.

The first two forces are fueling the rise of pedestrian deaths, she says. The third force explains why the problem has been ignored.

How great a problem is it? In 2018 there were 6,283 pedestrian deaths caused by automobiles, a 50 percent increase since the mid-1990s and greater “than at any point in a generation.” A depressing number of these were children and people in wheelchairs, and many were along high-speed suburban commercial highways like Tara Boulevard in Clayton County, Georgia, which Schmitt writes about.

This rise in pedestrian deaths has been a largely invisible problem. Newspapers rarely cover these deaths as they do victims of mass shootings, although the number of deaths along streets and highways is several times greater. (There were 387 deaths from mass shootings in 2018 and 1,283 injuries.)

But is this a solvable problem? Yes, which is why Schmitt went to Europe to see how cities like Oslo, Norway have virtually eliminated pedestrian fatalities. (In 2019, only one person was killed in traffic in Oslo “and he was a driver, not a pedestrian.”)

How did Oslo produce this miracle? By restricting driving in large parts of the city and forcing cars to travel much slower elsewhere. Also, Schmitt writes, European cities have invested heavily in transit, which reduces the need of cars, and in pedestrian infrastructure, which makes walking much safer.

If these things seem extreme to Americans, she adds that our neighbor to the north, Canada, has half the number of pedestrian deaths per capita as the U.S. There, investment in transit and stricter drunk-driving laws help greatly.

But you need not go outside the U.S. to find places that are reducing pedestrian deaths. One such place is New York, where a crusading transportation commissioner, Janette Sadik-Khan, made streets much safer for pedestrians, cyclists and transit riders by changing their roles and design, turning some into pedestrian plazas and bringing bike and bus lanes to others. (The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group [discussed Sadik-Khan’s book, *Streetfight: Handbook for an Urban Revolution*](#) in 2022.)

These actions were controversial at the time, but they worked and have been expanded. Result: There were 35 percent fewer pedestrian and cyclist deaths in New York in 2019 than in 2013.

What will it take to reduce pedestrian deaths in other cities, such as in Urban Atlanta? Two things, Schmitt suggests. First is an activist-led effort to make the problem apparent to the public and public officials. Second are investments in pedestrian infrastructure and road design that will be expensive—but not nearly as expensive as the investments cities and states routinely make in automobile infrastructure.

In writing about activist groups, she profiles one in New York called Families for Safe Streets whose spokespeople are New Yorkers who have lost family members to traffic fatalities. The group was modeled after the activist group Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which raised awareness of a major problem in the early 1980s. MADD not only awoke citizens and decision makers to deaths and injuries caused by drunk driving, it got laws passed. We can thank MADD for stricter driving while intoxicated laws and for laws raising the age for alcohol sales from 18 to 21.

Something similar will be needed to reduce pedestrian deaths caused not by liquor but excessive speed, poor road design and little pedestrian infrastructure. That is, we need groups

in Atlanta to do what Schmitt has done in her book—raise public awareness of traffic fatalities and lobby for changes.

In her conclusion, Schmitt offers her own list of the reforms and investments that could improve things: sidewalks, street lighting and crosswalks at places people need to cross that are protected by raised platforms and traffic signals. And more: Bus stops better located and made tolerable by shelters, and some version of what Europeans call “slow roads,” streets designed specifically to make cars go slower. (Elsewhere, she suggests that 25 miles an hour should be the default speed limit on city streets.)

There’s much here that could work in Urban Atlanta. But as we’ve learned in our Atlanta Urbanist Book Group discussions, reforms and public investments do not come without effective activism.

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.