

# RIGHT OF WAY

## *Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America*

By Angie Schmitt

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

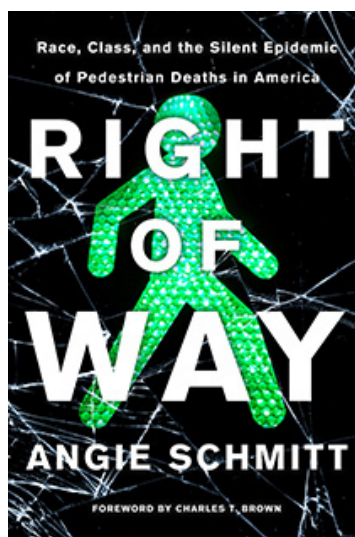
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Angie Schmitt published *Right of Way*<sup>i</sup> in 2020. An author, editor, and journalist, she has published widely on sustainable transportation, smart growth, livable streets, and pedestrian safety. She is an urban planner by training and works with clients across the country to make streets safer through her Cleveland-based consulting firm.



### BOOK OVERVIEW

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*Right of Way* builds a strong case backed by research and analysis about how pedestrians face disproportionate risk due to poor road design and lackluster policy, effectively showing risk is greatest in communities of color, low-income neighborhoods, and for other vulnerable road users such as children, elders, men, and people with disabilities. Schmitt details how American car culture has created a public health epidemic and how advocates are calling for change across the country.

# STUNNING STATISTICS

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## Setting the Scene

“In the United States, about 50 percent more people die while walking or using a mobility device today than a decade ago.” (p. 2)

“About every ninety minutes, one person is being killed walking on a street somewhere in the United States.” (p. 4)

“Phoenix city data show, for example, that in nearly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of pedestrian fatalities, the driver does not stop.” (p. 50)

“Black residents [in Seattle] received 26 percent of the city’s jaywalking tickets in 2016, according to a *Seattle Times*’ investigation, despite making up just 7 percent of the city’s population.” (p. 66)

“A 2018 study in Milwaukee found that at noncontrolled crosswalks – crosswalks with no traffic lights or stop signs – drivers were only yielding to pedestrians 16 percent of the time. A 2014 Chicago study observed the exact same proportion: 16 percent.” (p. 72)

“Compared with the three white research subjects attempting crossings [in Portland, OR], Black pedestrians waited 32 percent longer to cross and were passed by twice as many cars.” (p. 72)

“Police chases kill about 355 Americans annually, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. About  $\frac{1}{3}$  of those killed are innocent bystanders.” (p. 96)

“According to census data compiled by the government transparency group Data USA, 85 percent of civil engineers are male, and 80 percent are white.” (p. 104)

“In 2010, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimated the social and economic costs of traffic crashes to be about \$836 billion. The share that would be related to walking and biking injuries would be roughly \$125 billion. In other words, bike and pedestrian crashes cost America the

equivalent of about \$400 per person per year in 2010. Since that time, pedestrian fatalities have increased dramatically.” (p. 119)

### **Race, Gender, and Socioeconomic Factors of Risk**

“Statistically, Black men are about twice as likely to be killed while walking (or wheeling) as white men and four times more likely to be killed than the general population. The same is true for Hispanic men.” (p. 34)

“According to federal travel data, about 15 percent of Hispanic people rely on walking as their primary form of transportation. That is almost 50 percent higher than the percentage of non-Hispanic white people. Black people, meanwhile, are about 30 percent more likely than white people to rely primarily on walking. In addition, both Black and Hispanic people are also much more likely to take transit – a mode that requires a fair amount of walking – than white people. Latinos are twice as likely to lack access to a car as white people.” (p. 35)

“People who live in poverty take about 50 percent more walking trips than those who have higher incomes. And Black and Hispanic Americans are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white people to live in poverty.” (p. 36)

“Indigenous men are almost five times as likely as the general US population to be killed while walking.” (p. 38)

“According to a 2014 *Governing* magazine analysis, census tracts with high poverty rates have about twice as many pedestrian deaths as those with low poverty.” (p. 43)

### **Concerning Policies**

“Twenty-two US States have amended their constitutions to forbid any gasoline tax revenues at all from being spent on sidewalks.” (p. 14)

“At the federal level, bicyclists and pedestrians now represent about one in five traffic deaths, but they receive less than 1.5 percent of all federal infrastructure funding.” (p. 14)

“There are twenty-eight different infractions on the books in Florida that regulate pedestrian behavior. In addition to what we generally think of as jaywalking, pedestrians in Florida could be stopped and cited for not crossing at a right angle, for walking on the wrong side of the road, for not crossing using the shortest route, or for not walking on the sidewalk, among other things.” (p. 65)

“More recently, in 2019, two local men painted a crosswalk on 16<sup>th</sup> Street SE in Washington, DC, following the death of a 31-year-old pedestrian. The District Department of Transportation said that it had planned to install a crosswalk at the location, where it had been requested more than 250 days prior to the death of Abdul Seck, but city officials told radio station WTOP that they were waiting for the right weather.” (p. 100)

### **Promising Fixes**

“Thanks to a major initiative, including a partnership with the state, [Detroit] issued bonds for \$185 million in 2014 to replace and repair fifty-five thousand lights with LED lighting over a two-year period...Following the replacement of the nonfunctioning streetlights, the city’s pedestrian death rate fell 40 percent in just two years.” (p. 37)

“A 2014 New York City Department of Transportation (NYCDOT) report found that on six Manhattan corridors that have added protected bike lanes [...] overall crashes were reduced 17 percent, and pedestrian injuries fell by 22 percent.” (p. 111)

“Leading pedestrian intervals [which give pedestrians a five- to seven-second head start crossing the street before vehicles get a green light] are inexpensive, costing around \$1,200 each to install, but studies have shown that they can make a big difference. In 2016, NYCDOT found that fatalities and serious injuries declined 40 percent at the intersections where these timing devices were installed.” (p. 111)

“The school zone speeding tickets [through a speed camera pilot program], although they were only fifty dollars, were surprisingly effective at changing drivers’ behavior. The *New York Times* reported in 2018 that 1.2 million

drivers had been issued one ticket. But that one ticket was a strong deterrent: only 132,000, about 9 percent, received a second ticket.” (p. 166)

## HELPFUL TERMS

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**High crash network** (p. 19) – when a disproportionate number of crashes occur on a fraction of roads (ex: in Denver, 50 percent of traffic fatalities happen on 5 percent of the street network; in Albuquerque, 64 percent of traffic fatalities occur on 7 percent of its roads)

**Griddedness** (p. 29) – places with a tight network of streets that create a grid with many right angles and four-way intersections, are often found in places that developed prior to 1940, are conducive to walking, and have lower rates of car ownership (and in turn are likely to be safer for pedestrians)

**Windshield bias** (p. 49) – bias that centers the perspective of a driver; is often found in media accounts, in police reports, in court cases, and in views expressed by traffic safety officials; often minimizes the role of the driver while blaming the victim or placing excessive responsibility on pedestrians

**Aggressivity** (p. 96) – features on a car or truck that influence how likely a particular vehicle is to kill or injure others outside of the vehicle in a crash

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. What surprised you about the populations most at risk? How does Schmitt’s research illuminate the concept of intersectionality?
2. The author makes a strong case for how deeply car culture is ingrained in American society. How does car culture feature in race and identity?
3. What connections do you see between *Traveling Black* and *Right of Way*? How do these two books inform our understanding of how to enact change related to racial injustice?
4. How does Schmitt’s treatment of the issues that contribute to pedestrian risk on our nation’s roadways inform the tension between

structural change and individual behavior change? How does Schmitt's work relate to peace and conflict resolution?

## ACTIVITIES

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1. To the extent that it's safe to do so, take a walk around your neighborhood and journal about your experience. (If safety is a concern, observe the built environment while using a mode of transportation that you feel safer utilizing.)
  - a. Are there places where it feels threatening to walk in your community? If so, how? What design features make it feel safer?
  - b. Do you find that streets are designed for cars (whether it's for increasing traveling speed or making parking more convenient) or for other road users? How?
2. If you come across any news articles about traffic violence generally, and pedestrian crash victims specifically, read them with a critical eye.
  - a. How do they describe the people involved in the crash? Are the victims members of a vulnerable group? Is there a pattern of ascribing more responsibility to the pedestrian or blaming the pedestrian victim?
  - b. Is the crash framed as an "accident" (a neutral phrase that does not consider that the crash could have been prevented) or does it frame it as a crash (which invites discussion about systemic issues)? To what extent is road design mentioned as a culprit? Are policy proposals mentioned?
3. Research how you can influence transportation policy where you are living, whether it's writing a letter to the editor of your local newspaper, submitting a written comment or verbal testimony at a council hearing, or joining an advocacy group. Take one action to make your voice heard in the fight for safer streets.

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<sup>i</sup> Schmitt, A., & Brown, C. T. (2020). *Right of way: Race, class, and the silent epidemic of pedestrian deaths in America*. Island Press.