

When roads are built for speed instead of safety - especially in areas frequented by children - the consequences can be tragic

Is the US really interested in Vision Zero?

The Vision Zero principle – that no road deaths should be tolerated – is a powerful one. But with 40,000 fatalities per year, *ITS International* asks, could it take root in the US? Wes Guckert suggests a change of perspective is urgently required if that's to happen...

1. Vision Zero requires bold commitment from cities and road authorities: is this easier to say than to do? Why? What's stopping it?

Yes, Vision Zero is much easier to pledge than it is to implement. One of the biggest obstacles is institutional inertia. Many DoTs and municipalities still operate under a “mobility-first” mindset, prioritising vehicle throughput over safety. This culture is reinforced by outdated engineering standards that emphasise wide lanes and high-speed design—both of which contradict Vision Zero principles. Political sensitivity and public resistance also play a role. Lowering speed limits or reducing lane widths can be perceived as government overreach or as threats to traffic flow, even when data proves otherwise. Additionally, many agencies still rely on the outdated ‘85th percentile’ rule to set speed limits, undermining safety in areas dense with pedestrians. Finally, funding priorities often favour highway expansions over safety retrofits, while siloed operations across planning, engineering, and enforcement make the coordinated effort Vision Zero demands especially difficult to achieve.

2. You've talked before about the rise in traffic deaths among vulnerable road users, including in school zones – why is this happening?

Several factors are contributing to the alarming rise in deaths among vulnerable road users. The return to pre-pandemic traffic volumes without corresponding safety upgrades has worsened risks for pedestrians and cyclists. School zones, in particular, suffer from inconsistent enforcement of speed limits, poor crossing infrastructure, and vehicle-centric designs that fail to prioritise children's safety. Additionally, higher vehicle speeds dramatically increase fatality risks. A pedestrian hit at 40 mph has an 80% chance of dying, compared to just 10% at 20 mph. When roads are built for speed instead of safety—especially in areas frequented by children—the consequences can be tragic.

3. What are cities doing to address this? Is it about education, road design, legislation – all of these?

Cities that are serious about Vision Zero are taking a multi-pronged approach that includes all of the above:

- Education: Public campaigns and school-based programmes raise awareness about safe behaviour and shared responsibility.
- Engineering: Complete Streets designs—like protected bike lanes, raised crosswalks, and daylighted intersections—physically create safer environments for all users.
- Enforcement and legislation: Automated speed enforcement and revised speed-limit laws help ensure compliance without overburdening law enforcement.
- Equity-based investment: Cities like New York and Portland are using data to direct safety upgrades in historically underserved communities.

Success lies in integrating these strategies—not treating them as standalone fixes.

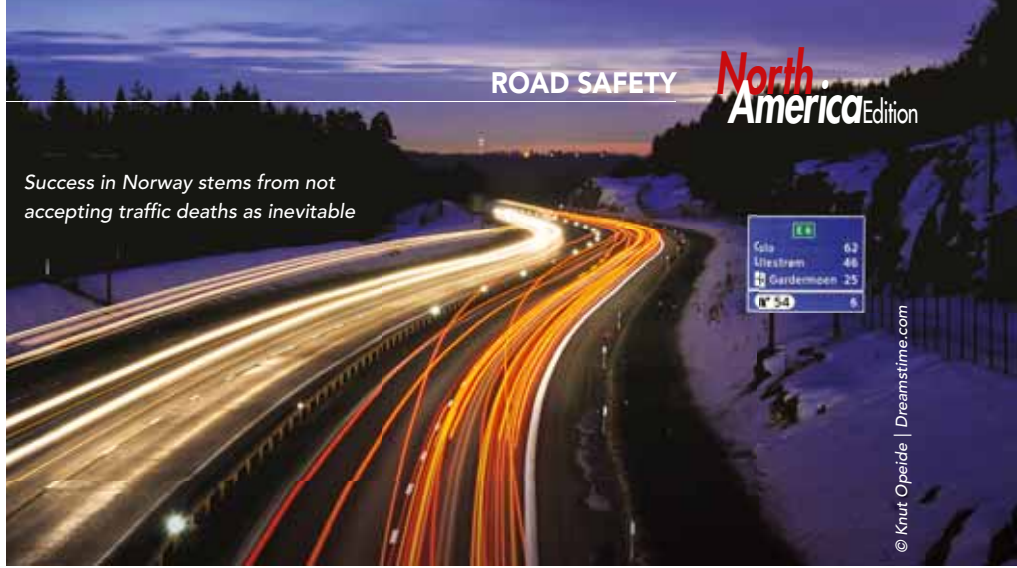
4. Vision Zero is an admirable goal – is it achievable in the US? Surely we'd just settle for a reduction in the 40,000 annual death toll – so why isn't even this being done?

Vision Zero is achievable, but only if we move beyond the status quo. Many US cities have proven that significant reductions are possible when systemic changes are made—like lowering speed limits, rethinking street design, and investing in safer infrastructure. However, too often, efforts plateau because of political compromise, resistance from within transportation agencies, or lack of sustained funding. Settling for a modest reduction isn't a failure of ideas—it's a failure of will. When other nations like Norway can approach zero deaths, it reveals that the barrier in the US is not feasibility, but commitment.

5. Have cities stepped back from Vision Zero? Have they given up, in other words?

Some cities have lost momentum, especially when early results didn't meet ambitious expectations. But many have doubled down, refining their strategies and expanding public engagement. For example, Montgomery County, MD and Boston, MA have updated roadway designs to better align with Vision Zero principles. The pandemic, budget constraints, and political turnover

Success in Norway stems from not accepting traffic deaths as inevitable



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have led some jurisdictions to deprioritise Vision Zero, but giving up is not universal. In fact, there's a growing realisation that the problem isn't the goal, it's the inconsistency of the approach.

6. Lessons from countries such as Norway suggest improvements can be made – but is the US just too different for it to work?

The US is different in terms of scale, car dependency, and governance but that doesn't make Vision Zero unworkable. The success in countries like Norway stems from prioritising safety in all aspects of transportation planning, not accepting traffic deaths as inevitable. What the US needs is a shift in values. We must be willing

to prioritise human life over speed and convenience. If we adopt safety-focused design standards, fund projects accordingly, and engage communities transparently, there's no reason we can't replicate the success seen in other countries. **ITS**



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