

The Need to Prioritize Black Lives in LA's Traffic Safety Efforts

Madeline Brozen and Annaleigh Yahata Ekman • 2020

Traffic violence is one of the leading causes of unintentional injury death in the United States, and people of color are overrepresented victims of traffic violence.

Los Angeles, like many other metropolitan U.S. cities, is working to eliminate traffic-related deaths through its Vision Zero program. Currently, the Vision Zero program does not consider racial factors to determine prioritized need and investments. However, a recent executive directive to increase racial equity in LA city government provides a charge to measure progress in Vision Zero by how it improves transportation safety outcomes by race. Combining these efforts — racial equity and Vision Zero — presents an opportunity to improve racial equity in transportation.

Many streets in Los Angeles are dangerous, allowing drivers to travel at high speeds, too often with deadly consequences. The city's Vision Zero "High Injury Network" includes 450 roadway miles, representing just 6% of city streets.¹ Each year, the Department of Transportation must decide where to allocate resources to improve traffic safety and decrease traffic violence.

In 2017, the department identified priority areas for improvements based on collision data, as well as other factors. This included prioritizing collisions that were located in a high-needs community, or that involved a bicyclist or pedestrian, child or older adult. Later, a City Council action instructed the department to focus mainly on the fatal and severe injury collisions and consider vulnerability, social equity and cost-effectiveness.

There is a chance to revisit this process, reprioritize efforts, and incorporate racial disparities in light of the recent executive directive that calls on each city department to create a racial equity action plan. To that end, this brief examines racial/ethnic patterns in Los Angeles' traffic collisions to highlight the strategies that could improve racial equity in transportation safety. The overall finding is that Black people face disproportionate safety outcomes in all transportation modes, but especially while walking. While city budgets are stretched thin, targeted investments in traffic safety — paired with the thoughtful inclusion of people within these communities — are critically important steps to stop the harm traffic violence inflicts on Black people and other people of color.

Analysis Approach

This analysis includes traffic collisions from 2013 to 2017, the five most recent years of finalized data available from UC Berkeley's Transportation Injury Mapping System database, which provides access to California crash data from the Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System. The collision, victim, and party files were analyzed together to examine collision factors, mode, and race/ethnicity of each victim.² In total, the dataset included 257,129 victims in 137,302 collisions in Los Angeles during this time. After excluding entries where we could not identify (1) the collision's location, (2) the victim's mode, or (3) the victim's race/ethnicity, the final dataset for analysis included 112,730 victims in 97,544 collisions. This subset represents a not-insignificant loss of data from the entire victim/collision dataset.

Differences in the collection of race/ethnicity data further limit this analysis. In the collision data, race/ethnicity is recorded by the officer at the scene who is instructed to

“use observation and their best judgment only to determine the party’s race.”³ Officers can only record one response in the report. In contrast, people self-report their racial/ethnic identity on the American Community Survey, the most commonly used source for population estimates. Using data from the 2017 American Community Survey five-year estimates, we present race/ethnicity based on the collapsed Hispanic or Latino by race table.⁴ In this approach, anyone who identifies as Hispanic or Latino is classified as Latino/a if they answer their race as either “white” or “some other race” (the two common racial answers for people who identify solely as Hispanic/Latino). People who identify as Hispanic and within the other racial categories are counted in “other” alongside non-Hispanic people of multiple races. All other racial categories show only the non-Hispanic/Latino/a responses, and those who respond with two or more

racess are collapsed in the “other” category. This approach oversimplifies people’s racial identity, and this is a notable limitation of this work.

Last, collisions that occurred on a restricted access freeway were excluded from the spatial analysis and otherwise appeared in the rest of the analysis.

Black Victims are Overrepresented in Traffic Collisions

In these five years, Los Angeles saw a 21% increase in the number of traffic collisions and a 13% increase in the number of fatalities (Figure 1). For comparison, when the city enacted Vision Zero in 2015, the goal was to reduce traffic fatalities citywide by 20% in 2017.

Figure 1.

The number of traffic fatalities and injuries from 2013-2017 in the City of Los Angeles.

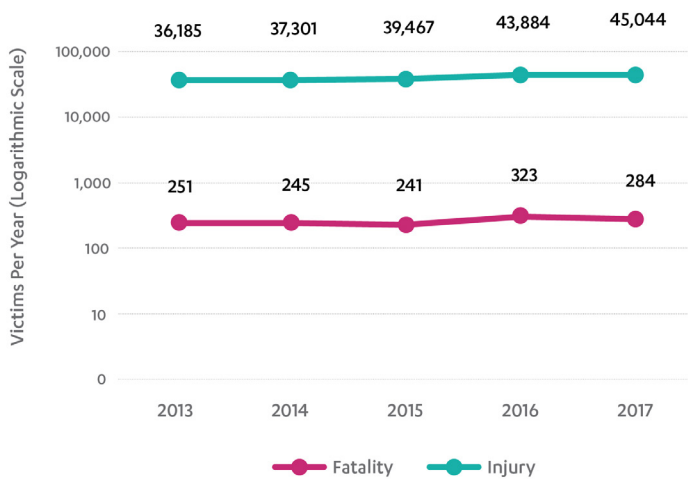
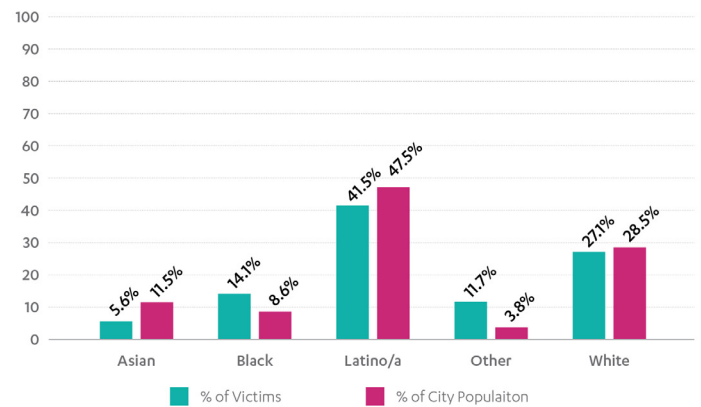


Figure 2.

Traffic collision victims by race and population, City of Los Angeles 2013-2017



Race/Ethnicity	Fatality		Injury		No Injury		Total
Asian	37	3.80%	6,205	5.60%	34	8.20%	6,276
Black	158	16.10%	15,737	14.10%	44	10.60%	15,939
Latino/a	424	43.20%	46,203	41.50%	161	38.60%	46,788
Other	87	8.90%	13,043	11.70%	56	13.40%	13,186
White	276	28.10%	30,143	27.10%	122	29.30%	30,541
Total	982	100%	111,331	100%	417	100%	112,730

Table 1.

Number of Victims by Race and Collision Severity

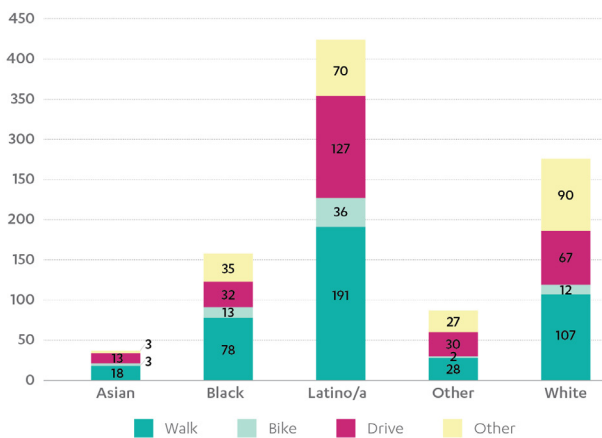
Table 2.

Percent of Victims by Mode and Race, columns total to 100%

Race/Ethnicity	L.A. City Population	Walk	Bicycle	Drove	Other
Asian	11.5%	4.2%	2.6%	6.2%	3.7%
Black	8.6%	18.2%	14.9%	13.6%	13.4%
Latino/a	47.5%	49.6%	55.2%	39.9%	33.8%
Other	3.8%	7.3%	4.7%	13.2%	8.7%
White	28.5%	20.8%	22.6%	27.1%	40.4%

Figure 3.

Number of fatal victims by race and mode



Black people and people of “other” racial categories (including American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders, multiracial people, etc.) are disproportionately the victims of traffic violence in Los Angeles. Black people represent 14% of victims and 9% of the city’s population, and people in the other racial category represent 12% of victims and 4% of the city’s population (Figure 2).

Black people face a higher likelihood to be a victim of a traffic collision, and worse crashes involving Black people are more likely to result in their death (Table 1). Black collision victims are most likely to have been killed and least likely to survive with no injuries than victims from all other racial groups. While Black victims were the most overrepresented in their proportion of fatalities (16%), Latino victims represent the highest number of fatalities (424 deaths in five years).

Further, Black victims are overrepresented in traffic collisions by every mode of travel. Black pedestrians face the highest disparities representing 18% of all collision victims, more than

two times the city’s Black population. Latino/a victims are also overrepresented among walking and cycling victims, with Latino/a cyclists representing the majority of bicycling victims (Table 2).

In terms of fatalities, 43% of all victims who were killed in this dataset were walking. One in four fatal victims represents a Black or Latino/a pedestrian (Figure 3).

Geographic Findings

This brief further examined where Black victims are killed or severely injured (KSI) by aggregating the most injurious collisions, those resulting in severe injury or death, at the neighborhood scale (Figure 4).

By and large, neighborhoods south of the I-10 freeway see a high number of severely injured or killed victims and a high proportion of Black victims. This is true in majority Black neighborhoods like Baldwin Hills and Hyde Park, and in more heavily Latino neighborhoods like Florence or Watts. Even in the majority Black communities, the percentage of Black KSI victims is markedly higher than Black residents. In Hyde Park, 11 in 14 (79%) of KSI victims were Black, while the neighborhood is 54% Black. In Florence, 12 in 27 (42%) of KSI victims were Black, while the residents are only 18% Black.

Next Steps for Effecting Change

Traffic violence takes a toll on too many lives in Los Angeles. Like other unequal outcomes, Black people in Los Angeles bear the disproportionate burden of lives lost to traffic violence. Therefore, their lives must be centered in the approach to improve traffic safety.

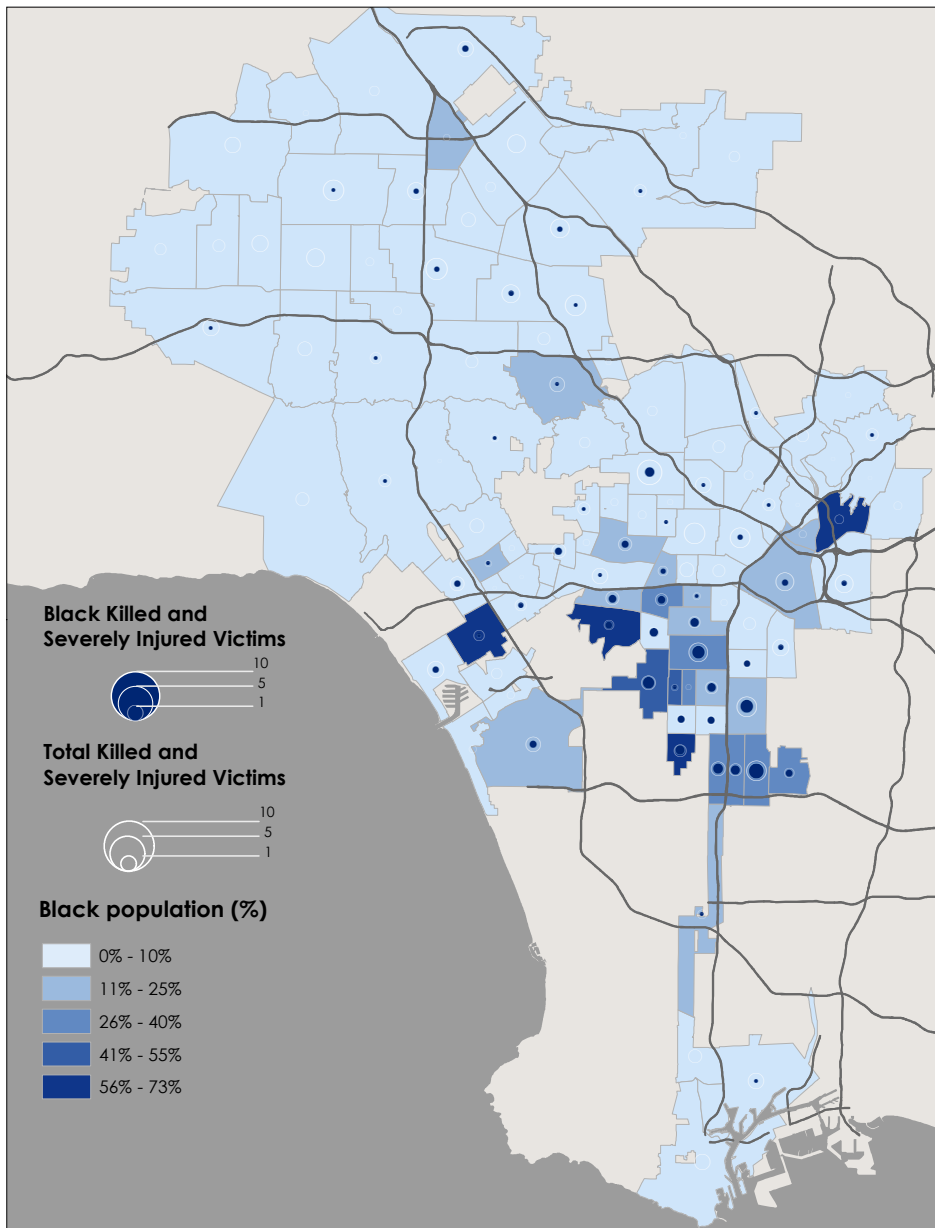


Figure 4.
Black Killed or Severely Injured Victims by Neighborhood

Based on these findings, all of the city's departments and bureaus that address transportation issues — the departments of Transportation and Police, Engineering, Street Services and Street Lighting bureaus, — have the opportunity to address racial equity in transportation safety efforts. Strategies for these departments to consider include:

- **Explicitly avoid traffic enforcement strategies with police stops.** Police are known to use minor traffic infractions as a pretext to stop vehicles. Also, previous analysis of LAPD stop data demonstrates higher stop and search rates among Black and Latino drivers.^{5,6}
- **Prioritize immediate investments in low-income communities of color where the need is highest.** Use approaches like those within the City of Oakland's Paving Plan that prioritize need based on factors that relate to underserved populations (people of color, low-income households, people with disabilities, households with severe rent burden, people with limited English

proficiency, and youth/seniors) or LA Metro’s equity-focused communities that prioritize time and resources based on similar metrics (people of color, low-income, and zero-car households).

- Couple investments with resources going to community-based planning and engagement.** Ensure that planning and outreach efforts include paid opportunities for community members and community-based organizations to be a part of the process. Projects should identify community leaders and partners early in the process to ensure solutions are co-created to fit community needs.
- Allow for opportunities to use streets to meet other community needs.** Even in communities with high numbers of collisions and dangerous streets, other concerns may be much more pressing than traffic safety. Use opportunities like slow streets to set up community resource hubs to address needs like food security with food banks or educational access with Wi-Fi hotspots and other creative solutions.

Traffic safety improvements alone are insufficient to address the myriad safety concerns and racial disparities Black people and other people of color face in Los Angeles’ transportation system. However, improving how their needs are considered, prioritized, and met can ensure that outcomes aren’t so deadly. Even as Los Angeles and other cities face tough budget challenges ahead, targeted and thoughtful investments have an opportunity to improve racial outcomes and reduce the tragic toll of traffic violence.

Acknowledgments

Support for this work comes from a larger forthcoming research project funded by the Pacific Southwest Region UTC and Caltrans. Many thanks to Caro Vera and Mehmet Berker for their valuable contributions to this brief.

About the Authors

Madeline Brozen is deputy director of the UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies.

Annaleigh Yahata Ekman is a recent graduate of the UCLA Master of Urban and Regional Planning program.

References

- City of Los Angeles Department of Transportation (2017) “Safety Study for Los Angeles” *Vision Zero Los Angeles*. <https://ladotlivablestreets-cms.org/uploads/8240b19bd2e649559294da12b5ce3663.pdf>
- Transportation Injury Mapping System (TIMS), Safe Transportation Research and Education Center, University of California, Berkeley. 2020
- California Highway Patrol. Collision Investigation Manual HPM 110.5. Sacramento, California Highway Patrol; 2017.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *2013-2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimate, Table B03002 Collapsed* [Excel file]. Retrieved from <https://www.socialexplorer.com/>
- RIPA Stop Data Dashboard (2020) Los Angeles Police Department, 2018 data. <https://openjustice.doj.ca.gov/exploration/stop-data>
- Poston, B., and Chang, C. “LAPD searches blacks and Latinos more. But they’re less likely to have contraband than whites” October 8, 2019. *Los Angeles Times* retrieved from <https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-lapd-searches-20190605-story.html>