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Author

Yonan, Jan

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Analyzing “Slow Streets LA” Impacts on Mobility and Social-Distancing



Jan Yonan, MURP

Issue

Beginning in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about societal changes at a pace and scale rarely seen in American cities. One noteworthy innovation was the deployment of new “open streets” programs across the United States. Commonly known as “Slow Streets”, these programs temporarily convert existing right of way for vehicles toward a more multimodal space to promote outdoor activity while maintaining social distancing.

In May 2020, Los Angeles launched its Slow Streets L.A. program to create space for city residents to remain physically active and socially distant amid the city’s COVID-related closure of recreational facilities. The program targeted local streets for traffic-calming measures, deploying temporary signage advising drivers to slow down when entering designated Slow Street corridors. Months after the city deployed more than 50 miles of Slow Street corridors, Los Angeles City Council passed a motion to make some corridors permanent. While the program has been positively received, the motion comes at a time when little beyond anecdotal evidence is known about the effectiveness of the program it hoped to reinforce. This research attempts to fill this knowledge gap, analyzing the impacts of Slow Streets L.A. on mobility and community recreation in neighborhoods that received the Slow Street designation

Research Findings

Reduced Traffic, But Not Speed

- All Slow Street neighborhood typologies experienced decreases in vehicle traffic — ranging from 6% to nearly 24% — compared to their 2019 traffic levels. While some typologies saw similar decreases in speed on weekdays, no single typology was fully successful at slowing vehicle traffic.
- When compared with its respective control corridor, the Slow Streets sample for Typology A’s high-density, urban core neighborhoods (Koreatown) — saw smaller increases in vehicle speeds and greater decreases in vehicle traffic over the first three months of development. This comes at a time when much of Los Angeles saw higher vehicle speeds due to decreased traffic levels.

Safer for Social Distancing

- Survey responses moderately affirm the program’s two goals of promoting social distancing and recreational opportunity. While just over half of the respondents believe that Slow Streets brought new recreational opportunities to their community, 70% stated that the designation made it easier to enjoy the neighborhood while following public health guidance.

4. What may be safety concerns for users of your neighborhood's Slow Streets?

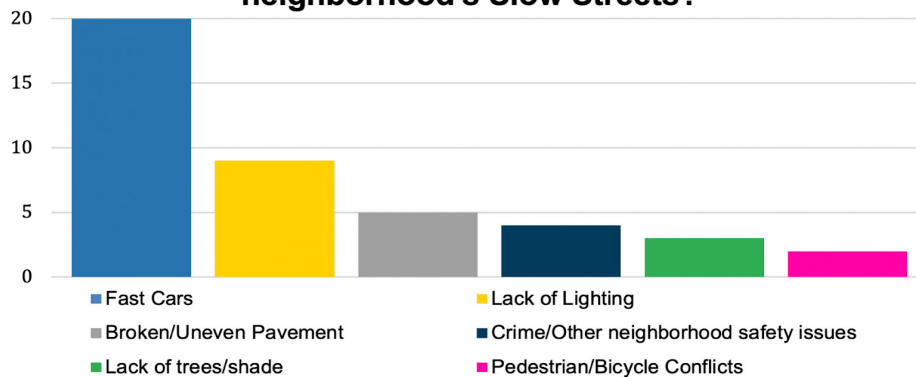


Figure 1: Safety Concerns of Slow Street Community Sponsors

Concerns of Neighborhood Conditions

- Community sponsors confirm ongoing concerns of vehicle speeds even after Slow Street designation (Figure 1). Such safety concerns are compounded by existing streetscape conditions that may disincentivize a Slow Street’s use, such as broken pavement or lack of shade.

Study Approach

The researcher explores the effects of the Slow Streets L.A. program in a variety of Los Angeles neighborhoods by separating the corridors into five neighborhood typologies (labeled A through E) based on urban form and socioeconomic information, and using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to garner a comprehensive snapshot of the benefits (or lack thereof) of Slow Street designation. Further, the research surveyed the community sponsors for the Slow Streets corridors to gather on-the-ground perspectives on issues of user experience and Slow Street maintenance. These responses were supplemented by comparative analyses within Streetlight, a web-based transportation data analytics platform, to study bicycle and pedestrian activity, as well as average speeds for vehicle traffic before and after a corridor’s Slow Street installation.



Yonan, J. (2021). Slow your roll! An analysis of LADOT’s Slow Streets program (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3803r459>

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Conclusions

Improve Slow Street signage. Noting numerous concerns by community sponsors around sign maintenance, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation should upgrade signs to be semi-fixed, not unlike a traditional stop sign. Future signage should also be bigger and more visible to drivers entering a Slow Street corridor.

Supplement corridors with traffic-calming measures.

Slow Streets should include more passive traffic calming to promote greater driver adherence of the 15 mph advised speeds. Other cities’ Slow Street programs that include plastic bollards, sandbags and traffic diverters around designated corridors can serve as a guide for future interventions.

Improve neighborhood walkability with infrastructure.

For future Slow Street corridors, funds should be directed to create a safe environment for all users, regardless of age or ability. Seeing the success of “Al Fresco” outdoor dining programs with quick-build infrastructure, Slow Street corridors can employ similar tactics to improve walkability in areas of poor infrastructure. These improvements may include widening sidewalks, improving visibility at night, or planting new street trees.