

[HOME](#) » CITY LIVING

The Truth about Jaywalking

Besides being dangerous, is there a silver lining to pedestrians' unruly habits?

By Christopher DeWolf

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When Montreal's police department announced last month that it had hired 133 officers to whip the city's unruly pedestrians, drivers and cyclists into shape, Montrealers responded with a collective roll of the eyes. We've seen this before — *les flics* hand out a few tickets here and there, wag their finger at people crossing against the light and then go home. It's all a distant memory within a week.



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This time, though, the police seem serious—or at least as serious as Montreal police can be about these sorts of things. They have a mountain of a challenge ahead of them: Montreal's drivers are notoriously aggressive and so are its pedestrians. When it comes to jaywalking, Montreal strides in solidarity with the best of the world's jaywalking capitals. This much is obvious at the busy corner of Saint Catherine and Stanley, where I found myself on a frigid Saturday afternoon not too long ago. Stopping to observe the Montreal jaywalker in his or her natural habitat, I conducted an informal head count—one, two, three, four ... a dozen. In less than five minutes, I witnessed close to a hundred people crossing the street illegally. (*See accompanying slideshow*)

It's no wonder that a high-publicity crackdown on jaywalking does little to change Montrealers' walking habits. It's hard to fault police officers for simply upholding the law, but should jaywalking even be illegal in the first place? Maybe it's time to rethink the entire notion of jaywalking. Maybe, just maybe, jaywalking is actually *good* for cities.

Hear me out. Of course jaywalking can be dangerous—by dashing out into six lanes of traffic, you're putting your life at risk. But most people don't do that. Around 1,700 pedestrians are injured by cars each year in Montreal, a minuscule fraction of the number of the people who actually jaywalk.

Traffic engineers want streets to act as traffic funnels; to them, pedestrians are mere nuisances. Regulating pedestrian crossings is a way to keep cars flowing, but the failure of lawmakers to control pedestrian behaviour shows that this approach simply does not work. Instead of trying to force pedestrians to conform to streets designed primarily for cars, why not adapt them to the behaviour of pedestrians?

The first step is to accept walking as a legitimate form of transportation, one that is equal—or even superior—to vehicle transport. “What we need to do is to shift our mentality and conceive of pedestrians as part of traffic,” says Dylan Reid, member of the [Toronto Pedestrian Committee](#), a pedestrian watchdog group created by the City of Toronto. “Being a pedestrian is the most efficient form of transport. The more people you have walking, the safer [the streets are] and the less pollution there is.” On streets that already bustle with pedestrians, Reid suggests that narrowing lanes and widening sidewalks is a good way to encourage walking and slow down traffic. “The speed of traffic is not related to efficiency,” he explains. Consistently slow traffic makes for streets that are less dangerous, less noisy and a lot more pleasant—while still moving cars along at a steady pace.

Amy Pfeiffer, a program director at the New York advocacy group Transportation Alternatives, chimes in with even more ways to make streets pedestrian-friendly. Corner bulb-outs give pedestrians greater visibility at intersections; mid-block crossings, especially signalized ones, allow for more opportunities to safely cross the street and advance signal timing gives people crossing the street a head start over vehicles. Similarly, pedestrian-exclusive signals are ideal for busy corners, letting people cross the intersection in every direction at once. “It's made a big difference in rationalizing what people do,” explains Pfeiffer. “It's really hard to control pedestrian behaviour.” Pedestrians aren't sheep. They will go where they want, when they want, as long as it's safe—and in many cases, that involves taking a calculated risk by crossing the street mid-block or against the light. “If it's safe to cross, they will,” says Pfeiffer. “It's also about safety in numbers: you'll get a huge platoon of people crossing [against the light] at the same time and they just assume that a car won't run down twenty people.”

It isn't a coincidence that the cities with the most robust jaywalking culture are those in which walking rules: Montreal, Boston, New York, Philadelphia—to mention just a handful. Jaywalking is the pedestrian's way of reclaiming the street. Drivers and their footloose counterparts might not get along in these cities, but they're keenly aware of each others' presence. "There should be some sort of interaction between cars and pedestrians," says Reid. Pedestrians already know that cars are around; cars should learn to accept that pedestrians will be around." Or, as Pfeiffer puts it quite plainly, "If you make pedestrians more visible, drivers will be aware of them." Surely it shouldn't come as a surprise, then, that the deadliest cities for pedestrians are also the most auto-oriented.

The notion that safety comes from constant interaction between different modes of transport is not a new one. In the nineteen-seventies, in fact, the Dutch pioneered a form of street that makes this concept its guiding principle; [the woonerf](#). Woonerfs—known as "living streets" in the UK—eliminate the division between pedestrians and drivers altogether. The resulting hive of activity—complimented by trees and various kinds of street furniture—ensures that drivers intuitively slow down to near-pedestrian speeds. When I mention woonerfs, Pfeiffer is enthusiastic: "They're awesome!" she exclaims. "Any street could be a woonerf except for really big ones." Reid is a bit more sceptical, but he agrees that most cities have at least some areas where woonerfs could work. Toronto's Kensington Market is a good example—its narrow streets, constant flow of pedestrians and cyclists and virtual lack of sidewalks (they're taken up by fruit stands and cafes) already ensure a relatively harmonious existence between different modes of transport.

But there are barriers. "We [North Americans] like to define our spaces. We don't like ambiguity," says Reid. Traffic engineers and transportation planners often see cities in profoundly different ways, so getting them to agree on pedestrian-oriented street design can be quite a feat. Improving the pedestrian environment requires the involvement of diverse government agencies, many of which are engaged in perpetual state of civil war.

But there's hope. Pfeiffer tells me that Transportation Alternatives (TA) might have found a way to bypass the bureaucracy altogether. By convincing business associations of the benefits of pedestrian-friendly streets, TA found that it can indirectly prod city governments into taking action. "Walkers are shoppers—that's something that gets the mayor's ear," quips Pfeiffer.

It will be a long time until city leaders realize the potential of pedestrian-oriented streets. In the meantime, make a statement by engaging in an everyday act of civil disobedience. Step into the street, look both ways and jaywalk.

Christopher DeWolf wanders our streets as Maisonneuve's urban affairs critic. His column appears every two weeks. [Read more columns by Christopher DeWolf.](#)