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No, Removing Traffic Lanes Won't Slow Emergency Vehicles

A new peer-reviewed study refutes claim that road diets increase emergency response times, based on a review of EMS response times in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.



MAYLIN TU AUGUST 9, 2024



(Photo by Jonnica Hill / Unsplash)

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In Los Angeles this year, [the firefighters' union and local officials](#) came out hard against [Healthy Streets LA](#), spending six figures in a campaign against the citizen-led ballot measure to build safer streets.

Their reasoning? Removing car travel lanes would put lives in danger by slowing down fire trucks and ambulances, they claimed. It's an argument that often comes up when a city wants to implement a road diet.

But a new peer-reviewed study on [4- to 3- lane conversions](#) finds that this is not the case: Response times remained the same before and after road diets were implemented in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

Though the scope of the study was limited to one city, researchers say that the results can help cities bust common myths about road diets.

"I'm not that surprised... I do think it makes a lot of sense that people's fears around road diets are not borne out by the data," says Miriam Pinski, research analyst at the Shared Use Mobility Center.

It turns out that Iowa is something of a pioneer in the field of 4- to 3- lane conversions, according to Nicole Corcoran, a researcher at Arizona State University who co-wrote the study. The Iowa Department of Transportation has also done an unusually good job with public outreach about the topic, she says — the agency even has a page debunking [common myths](#).

That's how this study came about.

"[Iowa DOT] didn't think that EMS would be burdened by road diets, but they didn't have any proof yet," says Corcoran. "We undertook that question, and we found there to not be a huge relationship."

That road diets reduce crashes and save lives is common knowledge — it's one of the Federal Highway Administration's [proven safety countermeasures](#). One study from 2006 that [examined road diets](#) in Iowa over 23 years found a 18.8% reduction in the crash rate. Nevertheless, pushback from people who oppose removing lanes is common.

For this paper, researchers worked closely with city officials, planners, EMS responders and the Cedar Rapids Fire Department. Working closely with experts in a local context was key, Corcoran says, to ensure the data was accurate.

"It was really important to us that we talked to planners about the other ways in which the city had changed during the time period of our study, to make sure that we weren't capturing any noise — any effect that wasn't truly from the road diet in our analysis," she notes.

For the qualitative portion of the study, researchers surveyed EMS responders across Iowa about road diets. They found that a little over half of survey respondents felt that road diets had either had no effect or had a positive effect on emergency response times.

One thing that researchers noticed: How respondents felt about road diets before and after they were implemented remained pretty much the same.

“I think another way we can help with community resistance... is to have public discourse with them prior to implementation, to make sure we can make their perception of that change as positive as possible,” says Corcoran.

The survey responses also showed that, according to EMS responders, many people don't know how to pull over for emergency vehicles. Instead of pulling over to the side, they pull into the center lane, exactly where emergency vehicles want to travel.

This indicates that cities could more effectively improve emergency response times by educating residents about the proper way to respond when an emergency vehicle is headed their way.

Corcoran points out that road diets don't just take away lanes from cars, they also add space for other modes of transportation like biking, walks and taking public transportation.

“Of course, for very pro-motorist communities, there's not a really good way to spin that there's going to be less room for cars,” she says.

Even with more data — and this study is hopefully just a start, says Corcoran — road diets are tough to implement. City leaders still need political will to make streets safer for everyone.

“It was a huge uphill battle for L.A. to adopt the [Healthy Streets initiative](#), and in other places, road diets get put up and then quickly get taken back,” says Pinski. “Sometimes you just have to build it first.”

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