



Crosswalks

Every Intersection is a Crosswalk

Research and experience has shown that painting stripes on roadways to designate crosswalks is not the answer to pedestrian safety that many people think it is.

A seven-year study conducted by the city of San Diego showed that nearly six pedestrian accidents were occurring in marked crosswalks for every one mishap in unmarked crosswalks -- that is, those unpainted crosswalks that exist by state law at all intersections. When this ratio was adjusted in terms of crosswalk use relative to vehicle traffic, there was still an impressive 2 to 1 difference in pedestrian accidents.

Based on the San Diego study, WSDOT believes that there are two important considerations when talking about crosswalks:

1. Marked crosswalks give pedestrians a false sense of security. People on foot must always act defensively around traffic.
2. While marked crosswalks are effective for moving pedestrians through complex and confusing intersections, they should not be seen as safety devices on their own. Crosswalks are most effective in conjunction with signals and other traffic control devices.

How secure are you in a crosswalk?

People generally think of marked crosswalks as safety devices, and most jurisdictions give the pedestrian the right-of-way when in a crosswalk. However, there is evidence that many pedestrians feel overly secure when using a marked crosswalk. Feeling safe, they may aggressively enter crosswalks without proper consideration of approaching traffic in the mistaken belief that the motor vehicle can -- and will -- stop for them.

By contrast, a pedestrian using an unmarked crosswalk generally feels less secure and exercises more caution in waiting for safe gaps in traffic before crossing.

Do crosswalks serve as a reminder to drivers to slow down and watch for pedestrians? This is a common assumption, but studies don't bear-out the "warning device" theory. Drivers often can't see crosswalks at a safe stopping distance as well as pedestrians assume they can. Road alignment, irregularities in pavement, distance, and other variables (weather, glare, and adverse lighting conditions) all contribute to diminishing the driver's view.

Meanwhile, the pedestrian's view of the same crosswalk is quite clear, and he or she may assume that the motorist can also see it clearly. Over-confidence is considered to be a major factor in a disproportionate share of accidents involving pedestrians in marked crosswalks.

Then what advantages do crosswalks provide?

1. May help pedestrians orient themselves in finding their way across complex intersections.
2. May help show pedestrians the shortest route across traffic.
3. May help show pedestrians the route with the least exposure to traffic and potential accidents.
4. May help position pedestrians where they can be seen best by oncoming traffic.
5. May help use street lighting to improve pedestrian safety at night.
6. May help direct and limit pedestrians to specific locations.
7. Unjustified or poorly located marked crosswalks may cause an increased expense to taxpayers for installation and maintenance -- costs not justified through improved public safety. Such crosswalks may also increase the potential hazard to both pedestrians and motorists.
8. Marked crosswalks can be a useful traffic control device. However, it is important that they only be installed where the anticipated benefits clearly outweigh their associated risks.