

Analyzing the Use and Impacts of Oakland Slow Streets and Potential Scalability Beyond Covid-19

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Introduction

In April 2020, in response to the rising COVID-19 pandemic, the City of Oakland announced it would close 10% of all city streets to through traffic to make more space for bicycle and pedestrian uses. Called Oakland Slow Streets, the program used signage and temporary barricades to discourage motorized vehicles from certain residential corridors throughout the city. The aim was to transform them into safer and more inviting spaces for people to spend time outdoors. Though it did not reach the full extent initially promoted, the city established 21 miles of slow streets, which remained in place until early 2022.

With its ambitious size and an explicit aim of prioritizing geographic and socioeconomic diversity, the Oakland Slow Streets program offers an opportunity to examine the impacts of rapid street safety interventions such as these, which proliferated globally during the pandemic. This study examined how Oakland's slow streets were used, how

they affected vehicular traffic speeds, and what differences could be identified across neighborhood contexts.

Study Methods

In order to examine how the Oakland Slow Streets were being used and what impacts they were having on vehicle speeds, researchers collected three types of data: real-time traffic speeds, on-site passerby counts of vehicles and pedestrians, and additional on-site observations of local conditions. The researchers collected data throughout the summer of 2021 in seven different Oakland neighborhoods. The chosen sites reflect a wide range of Oakland communities and socioeconomic contexts from across most "parts of town," including Shafter St. in North Oakland, 16th St. in West Oakland, Alice St. downtown, E. 19th St. & 11th Av. in Clinton, E. 16th St. in San Antonio, Arthur St. in Arroyo Viejo, and Plymouth St. in Webster. Six of these were streets that the Oakland Department of Transportation (OakDOT) had studied in

its September 2020 Interim Findings Report; the seventh, the corner of E. 19th St. & 11th Av., was selected by researchers for its unique intersection of two slow streets at a preexisting traffic-calming barrier. For each slow street studied, two non-programmed streets were also identified for comparison: an immediate cross street and a “control street” nearby selected to ensure similarities in street type, speed limit, and general demand for the street.

Data collection began with passerby counts on eight dates in May, June, and July 2021. On each visit, a researcher counted the people and vehicles that passed through every segment during a 30 minute timeframe. They also recorded street conditions and other observations. During the same months, researchers digitally collected traffic speeds from the website HERE.com for each segment three times a day on 68 different days. The team also compiled archival speed data from the same streets in summer 2019, before the pandemic for comparison. This produced data for different times of day and days of the week for each segment.

The most successful slow streets were in locations where preexisting street conditions and existing local mobility habits seem to have set them up to work as intended.

Findings

The data suggest conflicting findings about the success of slow streets from one neighborhood to another. They do not constitute clear evidence that a Slow Streets designation itself reliably yields reduced through traffic, slower traffic speeds, or increased pedestrian and bicycle uses: some slow streets exhibited desired outcomes while others did not. Traffic speed data were especially homogenous. And often any differences observed between slow streets and control streets could be explained as much by other factors as by the slow street treatment.

That said, certain slow streets did have more bicycle/pedestrian use than their nearby comparison streets, and in at least one case we can say that the slow street was clearly embraced by the local community and used regularly. The two most successful slow streets were in locations where preexisting street conditions and existing local mobility habits seem to have set them up to work as intended.

The remaining five slow streets were all quite different, but most had little bike/ped use and similar or even busier traffic than the non-treatment streets they were compared to. All of these are in relatively poorer areas, and four of the five are in predominantly Black and Latinx areas.

Policy/Practice Recommendations

The study’s findings help identify local conditions that may make a street more likely to yield the intended bicycle or pedestrian uses as a slow street. Preexisting conditions seem to have a large part in this. But all neighborhoods deserve safer streets and greater bike/ped opportunities. Future slow street programs should prioritize community outreach to ensure that even areas not predisposed to embrace or make use of slow street treatments initially can work with planners to emphasize local priorities and opportunities.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2152



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