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### Reclaiming Our Streets: A Framework for Mobility Justice

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**RECLAIMING OUR STREETS: A FRAMEWORK FOR MOBILITY JUSTICE**

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Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Bachelor of Social Work

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### **Abstract**

In contemporary society, cars are regularly considered a way of life; to many, it is customary—or even necessary—to own one. A lack of public transportation options or non-auto focused infrastructure has created a society that highly values cars, resulting in a largely car-dependent nation. Despite this, there are still many who do not drive—whether by necessity or by choice. In order to move away from an over-prevalence of cars towards a more holistic balance in U.S. communities, a people-first outlook on streets must be purposefully demonstrated. But before a shift is made from car dependency to walkable and bikeable cities, one must understand the issues at hand. The following research presents a scholarly review of literature as it relates to transportation culture and mobility justice, including an understanding of car culture, a study into the history and behaviors of cities with thriving pedestrian and bicyclist activity, and a look at culture shifts towards mobility justice. A proposed educational concept map, “Reclaiming Our Streets,” is presented to amplify the rights and dignity of pedestrians by tracing the history of car dependence and introducing a new way of thought. It hopes to enlighten others, and produce a culture shift towards safe and truly shared streets in the Nashville area.

## Introduction

In contemporary society, cars are regularly considered a way of life; to many, it is customary—or even necessary—to own one. In the United States, automobile ownership has been ingrained into the culture and environment of most cities and towns. A lack of public transportation options or non-auto focused infrastructure has created a society that highly values cars, and has resulted in a largely car-dependent nation. Despite this, there are still many who do not drive—whether by necessity or by choice. Typically, those who use these alternate modes of transit, especially pedestrians and non-motorized vehicle users, are considered secondary to cars. Cities often are comprised of arterial roads, or wide streets built primarily for fast car travel; sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike lanes are minimal or non-existent. Walking is not considered as a viable mode of transit, and cities' built environments reinforce this. Roads are often not safe for cyclists, with little space allotted for them alongside cars. And with pedestrians and cyclists alike, a collision with a car—whether fatal or not—will often put the locus of blame to the one not in a motorized vehicle.

For years, the dangers posed by cars have been seen as a necessary side effect of a functioning society. As the experiences of pedestrians and cyclists become more publicized, and as cities internationally become more conscious of the impacts of cars, a new foundation is being laid for what a truly safe, equitable, and functional city looks like. In order to bring this progress to U.S. communities in an understandable way, the importance of a people-first outlook on streets must be purposefully demonstrated. The following capstone research presents a scholarly review of the literature as it relates to transportation culture and mobility justice, including an understanding of car culture, a look at social advocacy campaigns, and case studies into the history and behaviors of cities with thriving pedestrian activity. A proposed educational concept

map, "Reclaiming Our Streets," is presented to amplify the rights and dignity of pedestrians by tracing the history of car dependence and introducing a new way of thought. It hopes to enlighten others, and produce a culture shift towards safe and truly shared streets in the Nashville area.

### **Practice Context**

Walk Bike Nashville (WBN) is a pedestrian-focused community organization that aims to create "a more walkable, bikeable, and livable Nashville" (Walk Bike Nashville, n.d.); "Walk Bike Nashville creates opportunities for people to learn, grow and feel safe to move through our city by foot, bicycle, and transit... We want to thrive even if we don't drive." WBN offers programming ranging from Safe Routes to Schools— an initiative encouraging a walking or biking commute to schools for students, to Families for Safe Streets— a national advocacy organization supporting the families of victims of traffic fatalities, to Open Streets Nashville— an event that closes streets to cars "to allow people to reconnect to their communities" (Open Streets Nashville, n.d.). On top of their programming efforts, WBN advocates with and on behalf of the community for safer streets, conducting research along the seven most dangerous arterial roads in Nashville and working with other local organizations and the Tennessee Department of Transportation to design and implement the best changes to the street. The framework they operate under is Vision Zero, "a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries, while increasing safe, healthy and equitable mobility" (Walk Bike Nashville, n.d.). Vision Zero has been proposed by Nashville's mayor John Cooper, making it an official government initiative, and WBN is working to do its part in implementing the needed changes.

The Vision Zero approach is one that fundamentally believes traffic deaths are preventable, street safety should be considered through a systems approach, and that safe streets are designed— not just enforced through regulations. "Vision Zero refocuses the government's

role in road safety to center on improving the transportation system, instead of attempting to change the behavior of individuals” (Walk Bike Nashville, n.d.). Nashville’s final Vision Zero Action Plan outlines five themes defining their future work: Create Safe Streets for Everyone, Prioritize Equity, Increase Collaboration + Transparency, Promote a Culture of Safety, and Improve Data Quality (Metro Nashville, 2022).

Nashville as a city has an unfortunate history with pedestrians. In 2014, the city was ranked 15th most dangerous for pedestrians by *Dangerous by Design*, and since 2014, general traffic deaths and severe injuries have increased annually (Metro Nashville, 2017; Metro Nashville, 2022). Historically, Nashville has noticeably lacked sidewalks, having built 300 miles of sidewalk since 2003, but still missing 1,900 miles as of 2017 (Metro Nashville, 2017). Seven roads in Nashville account for more than half of all pedestrian deaths and a documented 38 pedestrians lost their lives in Nashville in 2021 (Walk Bike Nashville et al., 2022). Many of these roads—known as “pikes,” or main corridors leading directly to Downtown- are lacking significantly in proper pedestrian infrastructure, like sidewalks, crosswalks, or adequate lighting. Improving the safety on Nashville’s pikes has become a major project for Walk Bike Nashville and Metro Nashville through the Vision Zero Plan.

On a larger scale, the United States has an unsafe culture towards pedestrians. Most cities and streets in the country are designed with cars as the primary user, relegating other modes of transportation to the margins. In the United States, car crash deaths are among the top ten leading causes of death for ages 1 to 54, are the number two cause of death for ages 5 to 9, and are the leading cause for ages 15 to 24; “the most dangerous thing [one can do] everyday is use our public streets” (Hafkenschiel, 2022). Many other countries prioritize safety and other modes of transit over cars, with Japan having streets safe enough for children to traverse alone and the

Netherlands having more bicycles than residents (Wilson, 2022; Schwarzer, 2021). Streets are many cities' largest public space, but in the U.S. and other car-centric nations this significant use of public land is, at best– restricted, and at worst– completely inaccessible for pedestrian or non-car use (Hafkenschiel, 2022). Because of a car centric culture, traffic crashes, injuries, and fatalities are accepted and seen as commonplace, while pedestrians have little to no rights within the street spaces. “For automobile crashes to be understood as ‘accidents,’ we really had to change what a road was...Before, the road was a place where children played, where people sold things...when drivers monopolized that space, it turned the road into a thoroughfare and nothing more”(Wilson, 2021). As is emphasized in the editorial “The right to roam” (2016), walking is a human right, but the current design of streets and cities in the United States leaves very little room for pedestrians to properly and safely live in their communities.

### **Social Work and Mobility Justice**

Many social workers understand person-in-environment– or the importance one’s surroundings has on an individual, including the need for sufficient access to transportation. In order to be successful at work, get appropriate treatment from a doctor, or be present for other significant life events, one has to have the ability to get there. While this understanding is fairly mainstream for social workers, the view of transportation justice from a holistic, critical theory perspective is currently not as prevalent. Perceptions of transportation largely still function from the societal belief that a car is the best or only way to freely move around a city. The knowledge of mobility justice as not solely the access to reliable transportation, but the fundamental belief that cities and society should promote safety and accessibility in any and all forms of transit, should be a perspective social workers are more aware of.

While this framework may be new in the general realm of Social Work, the core values of the profession— as they are listed in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics—support the perspective. The NASW lists the core values of social work as service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). For the value of competence, being knowledgeable on the impacts a car-centric environment has on a community is crucial. The tenet of service can be reflected in professionals advocating for liveable and accessible spaces in all parts of communities, and providing relevant programming in those spaces. When promoting social justice, social workers should strive towards total equity and accessibility to transit and public spaces, including parks and streets. Recognizing that every person deserves to feel safe while traveling in their city, and that pedestrians deserve to be treated with respect while using their streets encompasses the tenet of dignity and worth of person. By creating safe streets in communities, neighbors have the opportunity to connect with those they may not have met in an inaccessible space, highlighting the importance of human relationships. And when a community begins to make the street space their own, a social worker’s integrity fosters self-determination and self-sufficiency with the residents. To reference one of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare’s thirteen Social Work Grand Challenges, achieving “equal opportunity and justice” in cities can start with radical street safety and access (2022).

### **Literature Review**

In order to understand the critical theory approach to mobility justice, it is beneficial to learn the history of car culture and its relevance to modern society. In an article originally published in *Mobilities*, researchers Robert Braun and Richard Randell consider car culture and how it has taken over social mentalities— not just in the built environment, but also in beliefs,



imagination, and morals. Worldwide, traffic fatalities total to about 3,700 people every day, with another 385,000 people dying prematurely from health conditions caused specifically by automobile pollution (Wilson, 2021). Randell argues that this violence is not only caused by cars, but by a world accustomed to the violence through the specter of automobility—“the creation of a world where a ‘road’ is a place where you can be killed without a homicide being committed” (Wilson, 2021). Braun describes automobility as an ever-expanding totalitarian system that perpetuates violence in a multitude of ways, and the article provides four principal ways in which car culture dominates public perception.

Automobility has created its own culture and morals throughout the years, filled with violence, erasure, denial, and false notions. Through automobility, society has redefined what crimes are acceptable, with traffic fatalities becoming seen as unfortunate side effects— or “accidents,” even though roads were purposefully changed to solely accommodate cars. As car manufacturers and advertisers emphasized the “right to speed” or “freedom to go anywhere,” violence became accepted and normalized; “it was easy to write off roadway deaths as unfortunate ‘accidents,’ rather than crimes that had been committed against [citizens] in a community space where they have a fundamental right to safety and survival” (Wilson, 2021).

A side effect of this indifference to car-based fatalities is that the impacts of the violence— and the lives of the victims— are overlooked and often forgotten. Wilson, the author of this commentary, compared the ubiquitous presence of war victims memorials to the almost non-existent presence of formal crash victim memorials. Braun and Randell argue that car culture perpetuates “epistemic violence,” or erasure as the means of control. They claim that “powerful interests work quickly to clean up crashes and erase any evidence of death, along with the lives of victims and the grief of the people who survive them,” through insufficient

journalism and poorly detailed police reports. Society is desensitized to the impacts of car crashes and legacies of victims are often abandoned instead of honored.

Another way automobility sustains itself is by proclaiming that the only way to solve a car issue is by more, technologically advanced cars. Improvements to car technology have offered many ways to shift the impacts of automobiles— from the beginning of replacing horses with engines, to the current trend of replacing drivers with artificial intelligence. None of these improvements, though, address the causes of roadway deaths and oftentimes introduce a new form of harm previously unconsidered. An example the article highlights is electric vehicles (EV); while they are better for the environment than non-electric cars— they are still cars, and little attention is given to the dangers of EV battery materials and emissions. In general, “over-focusing on technological fixes can come at the cost of low-tech solutions that are proven to save lives *and* the climate — and it does nothing to stop automobility from becoming even more entrenched” (Wilson, 2021). Cars are still seen as the only way to go, with no attention drawn to their continuing issues and with high-level solutions constantly overshadowing simple and safe alternatives.

Finally, and possibly the most abstract impact of automobility, is how it convinces society it isn't a problem by insisting it doesn't exist. Car culture has become so ingrained into the social fabric that many can't see the world without it. Randell and Braun describe it as a “hyperobject,” or “a force so enormous and omnipresent in our lives that humans can't completely comprehend it, even though it shapes almost everything about how we live, move, and exist in the world.” Compared alongside climate change, automobility has such a fixed place in culture that crises are glossed over and many actively deny its existence. Advocates argue that to really address automobility, one can't address its issues individually; yes, car crashes can result from user error

or an unsafe environment or a defective vehicle, but in all cases the vehicle is still the cause. “A real reckoning with automobility...would reimagine the entire world to put the safety, comfort and dignity of the most vulnerable back at the top of the transportation hierarchy — and restore the physical space that they lost to automobility, too” (Wilson, 2021). Fighting against automobility, Braun states, is a lot like opposing colonialism. “Automobility is...taking away land in the road space where it’s assumed that no one valuable lives and nothing valuable is happening, [and imposes] a specific hierarchy between the automobilized and non-automobilized humans...It’s a whole way of life,” but a better life is possible.

A phenomenon that has recently gained much attention in the street advocacy world is a long-running Japanese reality television program called *Old Enough!* The show follows various children, ranging from ages two to five, as they traverse their communities alone to complete errands for their families. While some reflected on the impact on children’s mental health from the lack of freedom to roam, some on the limited opportunity imposed by dangerous city design, and others on car crashes as the leading causes of death among U.S. children and adolescents, the prevailing reaction to this show has been disappointment in autocentric cities and cultures. While Japanese “greeting culture,” or *aisatsu*, does play a central role in community, safe neighborhood design is also physically enforced; 19-mile-per-hour neighborhood speed limits, shared-use paths, the near abolition of on-street parking, and dense, mixed-use “15-minute neighborhoods” are all ways Japan has built an environment safe enough for a child to wander (Wilson, 2022). Another author reflects on childhood in relation to *Old Enough!*, contrasting the freedom and independence given to children in Japan to the United States’ condition where “convenience for cars becomes a major inconvenience for anybody who can’t drive one” (Valdetaro, 2022); “...everything which allowed my parents to drive me everywhere—high speed roads connecting

all of our destinations and ample parking when we got there—is exactly what made it impossible for me to safely get anywhere without them.” Musing on the subject led the author to conclude that street design is the primary factor of why *Old Enough!* works in Japan, but not in car-centric societies; “there’s really no age where our communities are safe enough for pedestrians” (Valdetaro, 2022). In this culture, streets are designed solely with fast moving vehicles in mind, even at the expense of children’s well-being and safety.

In one country— the Netherlands, the safety of children was the exact reason car culture was shifted. In 1971, more than 3,000 people were killed by motor vehicles, and in 1975, the rate of traffic fatalities in the Netherlands was 20 percent higher than in the United States (Schwarzer, 2021; Fried, 2013). When the child of a respected journalist became the victim of a car crash, the movement “Stop de Kindermoord,” or Stop the Child Murder, was ignited (Fried, 2013). This movement wanted to address the source of traffic death and injury, and managed to gather mainstream support from organizations with similar concerns. Another example of Dutch children influencing street culture was in the dense urban neighborhood of De Pijp. The children felt neglected by their environment, which prioritized cars and parking over them. They wanted to make a more liveable space for themselves and their neighbors, so they wrote letters to campaign for a street closure. Through the children’s advocacy and tactical direct actions, the city went on to install play streets, or streets closed off to cars specifically for social activity and interaction. From De Pijp and “Stop de Kindermoord,” Dutch cities have changed their approach to street design and the traffic fatality rate in the Netherlands is now 60 percent lower than in the United States (Schmitt, 2013).

Today in the Netherlands, up to 70 percent of all trips are made by bike, and some streets even designate cars as “guests” (Schwarzer, 2021). Bike lanes are large and often fully separated

from roads, making biking in the country safe and inviting. Children learn how to ride bikes in schools, and adults and youths alike use cycling as transportation. As improvements continue to be made in the country, the Netherlands is looking to invest in more cycling infrastructure, including “cycling highways” and more bike parking spaces (Schwarzer, 2021). The merits of active transit have been ingrained in the culture of the Netherlands, though it has not always been this way. It has taken the efforts of the Dutch community to highlight the wrongs of a car-centric society and implement a new, healthier way of life.

When it comes to advocating for greater pedestrian safety and the dignity of all road users, it is important to speak about the issue accurately. As was discussed previously with automobility, car culture has completely changed the way society views fatalities and the point of blame for injury is often put solely on the pedestrian. During Pedestrian Safety Month of 2020, this same narrative was continued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. A month-long public awareness campaign focused totally on ways pedestrians can protect themselves from cars, and had little to no mention of how infrastructure, policy, driver behavior, or even how cars themselves cause harm (Wilson, 2020). Some of the safety advice given to pedestrians include: carrying flashlights and wearing reflective vests, not using a cell phone when crossing the street, and not walking drunk. While all of the proposals seem to make sense on the surface, they do not address real issues and rely heavily on old victim blaming tactics. Pedestrians are often blamed for wearing dark colors at night, but drivers are rarely at fault for not looking for pedestrians— even when it is their right-of-way, and crashes still happen when pedestrians wear light colors. Cell phone usage of the walker only accounts for two percent of crashes, as opposed to the over 3,000 deaths, or around 8 percent, caused by distracted driving in 2020 (Wilson, 2020; Stewart, 2022). While walking drunk may not be advisable, it is not a crime

and is immensely less dangerous than a drunk driver; “conflating the non-crime of drunk walking and the massive public health threat of drunk driving is a dangerous and manipulative way to blame pedestrians for their own deaths” (Wilson, 2020). This campaign also shared information on older pedestrians being at greater risk of injury, with no advice or policy proposed at all—potentially implying that older adults are inherently more in danger, or harmfully implying they should not be pedestrians in the first place. Similarly, the campaign advised children to learn how to be good pedestrians by promoting “Walk to School Day,” but provided no guidance to drivers to watch for children crossing streets.

The theme of the 2020 Pedestrian Safety Month Campaign was *Everyone Is A Pedestrian*, but did little to affirm the experiences or rights inherent of being a pedestrian. One campaign that did just the opposite was the *#WeekWithoutDriving* hosted by the Disability Mobility Initiative in Washington state. This campaign asked people to go a week without driving themselves and document in real time their experiences as pedestrians and non-car users. “In a world of able-bodied activists who are non-drivers by choice, or non-drivers when it is convenient, there is a gaping lack of knowledge surrounding the almost one-third of the population who are non-drivers out of necessity,” and this campaign aimed to fill in that gap (Walker, 2022). This week of action spotlighted the various components that go into being a non-car user: the research and coordination of non-driving options (bus routes, sidewalk conditions, etc.), the complications and considerations necessary for getting around with no car (what must you bring with you during the day, you can’t leave anything in a car, etc.), and timing (commute times can be much longer when not in a car). A final component that stood out from this week was the realization that pedestrians and non-drivers are directly and indirectly seen as second-class citizens. The lack of infrastructure and accessibility for anyone without a car

became hard to ignore, and accentuated the vulnerability of those without a choice in non-vehicular transportation. The Disability Mobility Initiative is aware of this fact and stated “those of us who can’t drive or don’t have access to a car are more likely to be disabled, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color] and immigrants. We are also elders and young people, as well as those who can’t afford to own or maintain a vehicle. We are organizing for a future where non-drivers can access our communities” (Walker, 2022). The *Week Without Driving* campaign happened primarily in the Pacific Northwest of the United States, but because of social media, garnered a large audience. Through this movement, councilmembers who were invited to participate have become outspoken disability and mobility advocates. Awareness campaigns like these are truly effective in understanding the lived experience of pedestrians and acknowledging the rights and inherent dignity of all road users. In order to implement real societal change, cars can not be seen as faultless, and pedestrians can no longer be overlooked.

There are many cities beginning to see the benefits of a pedestrian-friendly, car-lite world. In Paris, major changes are quickly being made to how people get around. By 2026, the Paris government intends for the city to be 100 percent cycleable and on the first Sunday of every month, the Champs-Élysées bans cars to promote pedestrian and bicycle traffic (Not Just Bikes, 2021; Versed, 2022). The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, is known for her ambitious plans for Paris to reduce the environmental impacts of cars, improve pedestrian and public transit infrastructure, and is aiming for a mostly car-free city center by 2022 (Versed, 2022). Like the Netherlands’ history, Paris was at one time overrun with cars until citizens began seeing how stifling they can be. Now, mayor Hidalgo’s administration, with diplomatic input from citizens, is moving away from car-centric practices and is looking to become a “15-minute city,” where all necessities of living are within walking distance (Versed, 2022). Many other European cities,

like Pontevedra, Venice, Madrid, and Oslo have also banned cars in their city center, replaced parking lots with greenspaces and walkways, and have seen an increase in residents and a decrease in air pollution. While the city of Paris was built very compactly, it is not impossible for other cities to transform as well. In San Francisco, what was once a dangerous major highway has become Presidio Tunnel Tops park, overlooking the Golden Gates Bridge (Greenblatt, 2022). John F. Kennedy Drive and the Great Highway— known as the Great Walkway to mobility advocates— are two other places San Francisco has seen increased pedestrian favorability over cars (SafeStreetRebel, 2022).

Along with the cities making the shifts are the cities recognizing ways they could be next. In Maryland, the new light-rail Purple Line is set to open in 2026 in Montgomery County. It is intentionally being designed to accommodate walkability by not implementing new parking plans, and researchers are discussing ways walkability can be improved for equity across the community (McGowan et al., 2022). In Nashville, multiple publications have been made to visualize a more walkable city, like *Moving Tennessee Forward* and *Shaping the Healthy Community* by the Civic Design Center in 2012 and 2016 respectively. The current WalkNBike plan covers the research, design, and construction processes happening in the city, as well as case study of other successful city projects (Metro Nashville, 2017). As a final callback to the Netherlands, it is important to remember that progress starts somewhere and change is possible anywhere. Chris Bruntlett of the Dutch Cycling Embassy states "the Netherlands was built around the car like virtually any other country, and has subsequently retrofit that environment with great cycling infrastructure...built in the last 10 to 20 years...it's a recent development, but a transformational one" (2022).



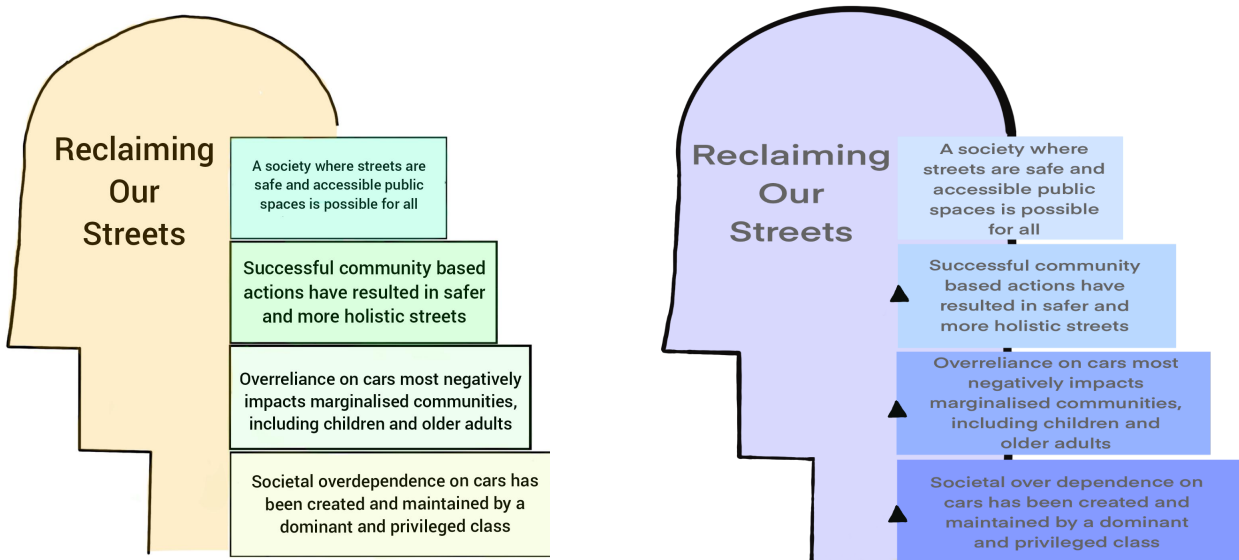
### **Intervention**

Research illuminates the under-discussed issue of automobility and an incessantly car dependent society. Even with the previous literature, much more can be said about the implications of this topic. Systems theory is a perspective commonly used among social workers that emphasizes the interconnectedness of various entities, or “systems.” When one considers who and what is influenced by car violence and dependence on a daily basis– the unhoused community, the economically disadvantaged, as well as the various demographics discussed earlier– the systems and the way they connect become more apparent. A change in one circumstance– say, available mobility options– has the potential to greatly shift the conditions in a system– ranging from new, affordable transportation, to safer pedestrian experiences, or even to more dangerous streets. Along with systems theory, critical theory– defined as “[a combination of] social control, elite power [theory], and economics...Critical theory examines...social order and the ways...power and domination affects people’s lives–” can be applied as one considers who and what influences car dependence and automobility on our current society (Segal, 2010). The literature by Braun and Randell muses on this clearly, acknowledging the way “automakers, policymakers, and...a neoliberal economy” restructured society and redesigned who streets are for, effectively disadvantaging anyone without or not in one; “automobility is expanding... It’s about claiming whatever space it hasn’t already dominated” (Wilson, 2021). A tenant central to critical theory is the “prescriptions for change that liberate oppressed people from people of power” (Segal, 2010). Critical theory can make one recognize the violence and dangers posed daily by cars that either go largely unnoticed or are blatantly dismissed. This theoretical lens provides a way of conceptualizing the issue of mobility in a way that encourages innovation and well-being for all.

Strengthening the theory perspectives of mobility justice is the data, both quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, the number of traffic deaths, sidewalk mileage, and greenhouse gas emissions can easily be tracked through public data. Qualitatively, speaking to those most impacted by traffic violence— or even just observing a busy street— can make the need for a new perspective apparent. From organizational feedback from Walk Bike Nashville’s Families for Safe Streets members, families who have lost loved ones to traffic violence have stated that others, including family members, question the actions and habits of a pedestrian before addressing the roots of car crashes. Victim blaming is rife in discussions of pedestrian and cycling safety, and can be perpetuated institutionally, mentioned in the previous section among journalists and police reports. From personally authored research, it is apparent that even with pedestrian safety measures utilized, drivers are often still not inclined to behave with them in mind. Research collected in Memphis, Tennessee on behalf of the Memphis Medical District Collaborative showed in secondary data that many drivers did not slow their speed on a four-lane road, despite crosswalks with flashing signals, frequent pedestrian presence, and a hospital outpatient center nearby (Gipson, 2022). The data was collected along the course of a week at various times of day, and in differing weather conditions. Though the region would improve with physical changes to the street like proposed under Vision Zero, more than just a better built environment— but a mental shift— is needed for safety; while it is true road design is a major factor of driver behavior, it is crucial that drivers understand that pedestrians and cyclists have a right to the road as well.

In order to disseminate these theories and present research in an accessible way, the following conceptual framework will share the ideas developed herein. A conceptual framework is “a tool...to help facilitate the understanding of the relationship among concepts or variables in

relation to the real-world” (NCU Library, 2022). Conceptual frameworks take theories and research, and presents them in a way that is understandable and easily shared, and can educate the general population. To truly create safe streets, one must understand the role and culpability of car dependence, move away from victim blaming, and consider a safer, healthier, and more holistic approach to travel, pedestrian safety, and pedestrian dignity.



*First and second draft, respectively, of the conceptual framework “Reclaiming Our Streets”*

*Illustrated by Esther Alvarado Luna*

The "Reclaiming Our Streets" framework demonstrates how automobility is the basis of much societal understanding of mobility, how this has had negative impacts on communities, and how there is potential to explore different possibilities; it was designed to resemble a human head, and to be read bottom to top, following the thought process from car dependence to mobility liberation. This framework was developed to be shared amongst anyone, with a focus on mobility and social justice advocates and organizations. It will initially be shared with Walk Bike Nashville, and then distributed to similar local and regional groups. Mobility justice groups may use this to demonstrate their stances on cars and public safety in a simple way, or it can be

used as a basis for a beginning mobility justice organization. This framework can be administered freely, though would benefit most from being shared by those with the knowledge to elaborate on each level of information. The framework aims to connect systems and critical theory, both by content and by visual design— in a way understood by both social workers and others. Systems theory is broadly demonstrated through the various influences cars have had on differing social groups and the potentially shifting impact; critical theory can be seen as generally accepted thought and power imbalances are addressed and reimagined. The goal of “Reclaiming Our Streets” is to make data and perspectives on mobility justice widely available and understood, eventually leading more individuals and organizations to promote mobility justice and safe, holistic street spaces.

### **Evaluation**

As a way to judge the effectiveness of the framework, a focus group of mobility advocates will gather to discuss it in the form of a formative evaluation; in this case, staff of Walk Bike Nashville will be the primary evaluators. By having solely mobility advocates analyze it initially, input can be gained on whether the most accurate information is being shared by the framework. The main questions asked about the framework would include: “is this framework clear and understandable,” “does it cover the basic beliefs of this cause,” and “how likely are you to share or adopt it personally or for the institution?” These questions will help shape the framework into an easy, introductory concept map. Some secondary questions may involve the visual implications of the framework; “is it easy to follow,” and “this framework is intended to be all-inclusive— do the colors chosen reflect a neutral or multicultural design, or does it seem to imply a particular racial background?” The data will be primarily qualitative, and responses will be recorded to possibly implement changes afterwards. Some early feedback is reflected in the

addition of arrows to improve visual comprehension. The use of qualitative data provides nuanced, detailed feedback, and leads to rich data on what may or may not benefit the framework. Starting with WBN staff may also provide insight in the state of mobility justice in Nashville specifically. The qualitative data gained from the initial focus group can be used alongside other research, including quantitative, to strengthen the mobility justice argument, as well as the concept map itself. If adopted by the organization, a summative evaluation can later be done on the framework to determine if other mobility justice organizations could benefit from this as a central resource.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Like with much research, a few difficulties arose with this intervention, and may come about in the evaluation. Since the topic of mobility justice is not currently widely discussed, there were little to no perspectives from social workers available in the review of scholarly literature. The closest commitment social workers have in the mainstream sense is to sustainability, which of course is important, but not quite encompassing of mobility justice. The research found was substantial and covered plenty— with more able to be added if necessary, there is just a lack of articles or journals found specific to the social work field. For the potential evaluation, there is a possibility of bias in the data collection. While there is a purpose to specifically asking mobility justice advocates for feedback, there is still a chance of differing outlooks among the focus group. The staff of Walk Bike Nashville itself is fairly small, which could also pose some difficulties from sample size. As for the intervention itself, various potential limitations exist. It is possible that, even with the concept map, people remain unaware of the issue of automobility or are dismissive of the topic of mobility justice. Like Randell and Braun had described it, car dependence can be a “hyperobject,” making it a difficult concept to

grasp initially (Wilson, 2021). Because of this, the framework may remain inaccessible; no matter how we explain or describe the concepts, some may not develop a strong understanding, or it may take more than the map is able to provide. Finally, the framework having an insufficient reach can be a limitation to the intervention. Whether the concept map stays within mobility justice organizations and circles, or doesn't gain traction outside of those interested— if people are not seeing the framework, then a central goal is not being achieved.

Despite limitations, there are several strengths and opportunities that can come from this concept. Though the Walk Bike Nashville focus group would be small, WBN staff is quite diverse in ethnicity, place of origin, and other backgrounds— which can lead to very rich feedback and may be less likely to result in myopic or ethnocentric data. As this research was presented from a social work perspective, it has the potential to fill a gap in social work research and practice by including mobility justice as a key social work advocacy initiative, and by adding to the body of social work knowledge. Mobility justice encompasses the promotion of public health, environmental health and sustainability, and quality of life— all central or related components of the social work profession. Hopefully, through this research and intervention, traffic violence and pedestrian dignity will get proper recognition from social workers and social justice advocates. Finally, the work of mobility justice is gaining recognition on a larger scale. It is possible that the concept map will remain in an echochamber of street safety advocates, but as more people become aware of the state of their communities, more are open to different forms of liberation. The negative impact cars have on the environment is well-known, but many are also beginning to see the positive impact walkable and bikeable cities have on neighborhoods.

### **Implications for Practice**

The research presented in this document was intended to describe the presence and issues of automobility, shed light on what the absence of car dependence can be, and describe ways to properly understand pedestrians' rights and the need for more safety along city streets. With this information, an intervention was developed in order to share the research content in a short and accessible way. As has been mentioned throughout, a key to seeing and conceptualizing mobility justice requires the knowledge to identify it. The "Reclaiming Our Streets" concept map is an overarching introduction to mobility justice through a critical evaluation of current and potential societal circumstances. Through this map, there is a hope for those unaware of the state of pedestrian dignity to be made conscious of it, and potentially become an advocate for a more holistic approach to streets as public spaces. Without this framework, many in society will continue to be unaware of something that impacts them everyday. This framework can be the introduction for many to a new way of thinking and the beginning of a culture shift. Walk Bike Nashville and other mobility advocates may utilize it as an educational tool or extension of their work. The social work field can also use this product to enhance its current regard toward street safety and accessibility, expanding the application of its core values to a noteworthy cause. All in all, the ambition for this work is for liberation of the public city space, once dangerous and open to some— now a truly accessible community extension for all to experience life in.

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