

Atlantic Avenue's Inequitable Crash Burden

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Executive Summary



Atlantic Avenue is Brooklyn's Main Street, a 10-mile corridor that extends east to west from Brooklyn Heights to the far reaches of Richmond Hill in Queens. It's the heart of Brooklyn's commercial and cultural attractions, home to hundreds of businesses and families of all ages and a hub for a number of transit lines. Due to its wide span, it connects some of Brooklyn's wealthiest areas like Cobble Hill and Boerum Hill with low-income neighborhoods like Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville and East New York.

Atlantic Avenue is also one of Brooklyn's most deadly arterial streets. On average, 800 people are injured every year in crashes on Atlantic Avenue. At least 26 people have been killed on the corridor since 2012. Recent analysis conducted by Transportation Alternatives and the Tri-State Transportation Campaign found that Atlantic Avenue was identified as one of the most dangerous streets in Brooklyn for pedestrians, both anecdotally (according to survey respondents) and statistically.¹ A legacy of New York's former rural road system, it is designed to carry large volumes of motor vehicles at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists. Widening to as many as ten traffic lanes in certain segments, Atlantic's design encourages speeding and other dangerous driving behaviors.

Recognizing the danger to pedestrians and cyclists alike, the NYC Department of Transportation (DOT) declared Atlantic Avenue one of four "Vision Zero Great Streets" in early 2015.² While a sweeping redesign was implemented on part of Queens Boulevard last year, DOT's redesign will focus on just two miles of Atlantic: from Pennsylvania Avenue to Rockaway Boulevard. To fix one small section of this highly dangerous avenue would shift the burden of traffic crashes from one economically disadvantaged neighborhood to another.

While Vision Zero is now official policy, tens of thousands of New Yorkers continue to be injured in traffic crashes each year, and inequality is still a fact of life in our city. With the objective of ending traffic fatalities comes a new need to emphasize that, at present, not all communities across New York City are equally affected by the burden of traffic violence, nor are street safety improvement projects being implemented equitably. This report will zero in on the unequal burden of traffic crashes along Atlantic Avenue.

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- 1 Fried, Ben. (2014). "Cumbo Calls for Safer Atlantic Ave, and Trottenberg Promises Action" <http://www.streetsblog.org/2014/03/28/cumbo-calls-for-safer-atlantic-ave-and-trottenberg-promises-action/>
 - 2 Miller, Stephen. (2015). "De Blasio commits \$250M to Overhaul Major Streets, But How Far Will It Go?" <http://www.streetsblog.org/2015/03/05/de-blasio-commits-250-million-to-arterial-redesigns-but-how-far-will-it-go/>

Introduction

The dangers of walking or biking along Atlantic Avenue are well-known to residents who live nearby. As a major arterial corridor connecting Brooklyn motorists to points east, the site of numerous transit hubs, and points of cultural and commercial interest, Atlantic Avenue is one of the most traffic-choked streets in all of Brooklyn, with its demand far outweighing its capacity. The problem is particularly acute for non-motorists, who are forced to contend with Atlantic's immense width, high speeds and heavy car traffic, in otherwise residential areas. This congestion makes Atlantic Avenue a dividing line, separating and marginalizing otherwise thriving communities, a common relic of arterial streets designed by Robert Moses. As Gib Veconi of the Prospect Heights Neighborhood Development Council put it, Atlantic is "a place where people are afraid to cross the street to get to one neighborhood from the other. It should be a pedestrian-friendly, safe street, that can unite neighborhoods instead of divide them."¹ As of now, Atlantic's design sends the following message: "I am a street for cars, hear me roar." It's time for that to change.

1 Fried, Ben. (2014). "Cumbo Calls for Safer Atlantic Ave, and Trottenberg Promises Action" <http://www.streetsblog.org/2014/03/28/cumbo-calls-for-safer-atlantic-ave-and-trottenberg-promises-action/>

Why is Atlantic Avenue problematic?

Socioeconomic profile

Given its length, the socioeconomic profile of those who live near Atlantic Avenue varies widely, but there are some commonalities. **On average, more than a quarter of the population residing near Atlantic lives in poverty, compared to just over 20% borough-wide.¹ The Atlantic area is home to a higher percentage of “disconnected youth” – those between the ages of 16 and 24 who are not enrolled in school or employed – than the borough as a whole. A whopping 58% of the households near Atlantic are “car-free.” And the percentage of residents living in public housing (39%) and afflicted with asthma (14%) is significantly higher than borough-wide averages for the same measures.**

We also know that those living in poorer parts of the city more often suffer from inadequate urban planning and a lack of infrastructure investment. These also tend to be communities where the majority of residents are people of color. These statistics shed light on the economic and environmental hardships borne by the population near Atlantic Avenue.

A forthcoming report produced by Transportation Alternatives in partnership with Avazea, scheduled for release in early 2017, examines the correlation between measures of poverty and crash density in NYC. One of the report’s most significant takeaways: **wealthier census tracts tend to have fewer crashes.** The report’s section on crash density in Brooklyn found that there was a strong correlation between crash density and individual and family poverty rates, median income and unemployment rates, suggesting that NYC’s low-income residents are more vulnerable to traffic violence.²

While the correlation between crash density and poverty rate has become increasingly clear, New York City has yet to prioritize a significant redesign that reaches all of Atlantic’s high-poverty, disenfranchised neighborhoods. It is pertinent that these neighborhoods with a history of under-investment in safety improvements are first in line for interventions going forward.

Safety prognosis

1 <https://issuu.com/studybrooklyn/docs/community-district-2-brooklyn-neighborhood-report>

2 Transportation Alternatives. (2017). “The Vision Zero Case for Equitable Investment in Safe Streets”

The poverty-crash density correlation is evidenced by Atlantic’s crash numbers, which are among the highest of any corridor in Brooklyn. **Since 2012, more than 3,300 people have been injured and 26 have been killed on the corridor. This means that on average, more than 2 people are injured in traffic every day on Atlantic.**

Arterial streets like Atlantic account for over 50% of all severe pedestrian injuries and fatalities in Brooklyn.³ Because of their wide design, arterials typically accommodate and encourage high speeds, intensifying these already high-crash pedestrian corridors. High-volume, high-speed, high-crash corridors can be difficult to improve, but safety interventions such as speed limit reductions, increased enforcement against dangerous driving behaviors (speeding, failure to yield, etc.), shortened crossing distances and added pedestrian/cyclist infrastructure can have profound, lasting impacts. NYC’s slow zone program, for example, has reduced crashes with injuries by 14%.⁴

An underwhelming street redesign proposal

The call for a corridor-wide intervention on Atlantic Avenue is nothing new; residents and safety advocates have been demanding action on the corridor for almost four years. Ahead of a March 2014 Vision Zero Town Hall Forum, Council Member Laurie Cumbo held a press conference calling for immediate action targeting traffic violence on Atlantic, stating: “We can’t wait for another child to be the face of why we need Vision Zero. So many of these [crashes] could be avoided with the right measures.”⁵ Shortly after the press conference, DOT Commissioner Trottenberg told crowds at the forum that Atlantic was one of the department’s “early priorities for safety fixes.”

Just a few weeks after the Forum, DOT and NYPD announced that Atlantic Avenue would become the city’s first 25 MPH arterial slow zone. Part of the city’s Vision Zero Action Plan, the arterial slow zone program would reduce the speed limit to 25 MPH from what was then the citywide limit of 30 MPH. Slow zone streets also received new speed limit signage, “design fixes from DOT and focused enforcement by NYPD,” according to Streetsblog.⁶ **While community representatives were pleased with the implementation of the arterial slow zone program, the**

3 NYC DOT. (2015). “Brooklyn Pedestrian Safety Action Plan”. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/ped-safety-action-plan-brooklyn.pdf>

4 IBID

5 Fried, Ben. (2014). “Cumbo Calls for Safer Atlantic Ave, and Trottenberg Promises Action” <http://www.streetsblog.org/2014/03/28/cumbo-calls-for-safer-atlantic-ave-and-trottenberg-promises-action/>

6 Miller, Stephen. (2014). “Atlantic Ave First of 25 ‘Arterial Slow Zones’ to Get 25 MPH Limit This Year.” <http://www.streetsblog.org/2014/04/09/atlantic-ave-first-of-25-arterial-slow-zones-to-get-25-mph-limit-this-year/>

design improvements and increased traffic enforcement promised by the Commissioner were never delivered.

In March 2015, the NYC Department of Transportation declared Atlantic Avenue one of four “Vision Zero Great Streets.” The initiative designates \$250 million in capital funds to improve safety on Queens Boulevard, the Grand Concourse, Atlantic and Fourth avenues in Brooklyn. Atlantic Avenue was also identified as a priority corridor in the 2015 Brooklyn Pedestrian Safety Action Plan, which was produced as part of the city’s Vision Zero initiative. The plan examined safety conditions and identified the areas, corridors and intersections most in need of safety interventions in all five boroughs based on community feedback sessions and pedestrian fatality and severe injury (referred to as KSI, killed or severely injured) statistics.⁷

While work began last year on a dramatic redesign of Queens Boulevard – including protected bike lanes, widened center medians and expanded pedestrian space – DOT’s redesign will focus on just two miles of Atlantic: from Georgia Avenue to Rockaway Boulevard. The funding needed to enact the sort of redesigns

Atlantic Ave - Georgia Ave to Logan St, BK
Injury Summary, 2010-2014 (5 Years)

	Total Injuries	Severe Injuries	Fatalities	KSI
Pedestrian	95	13	2	15
Bicyclist	22	1	0	1
Motor Vehicle Occupant	1064	35	1	36
Total	1181	49	3	52

Fatalities, 01/01/2010-11/30/2015 : 3

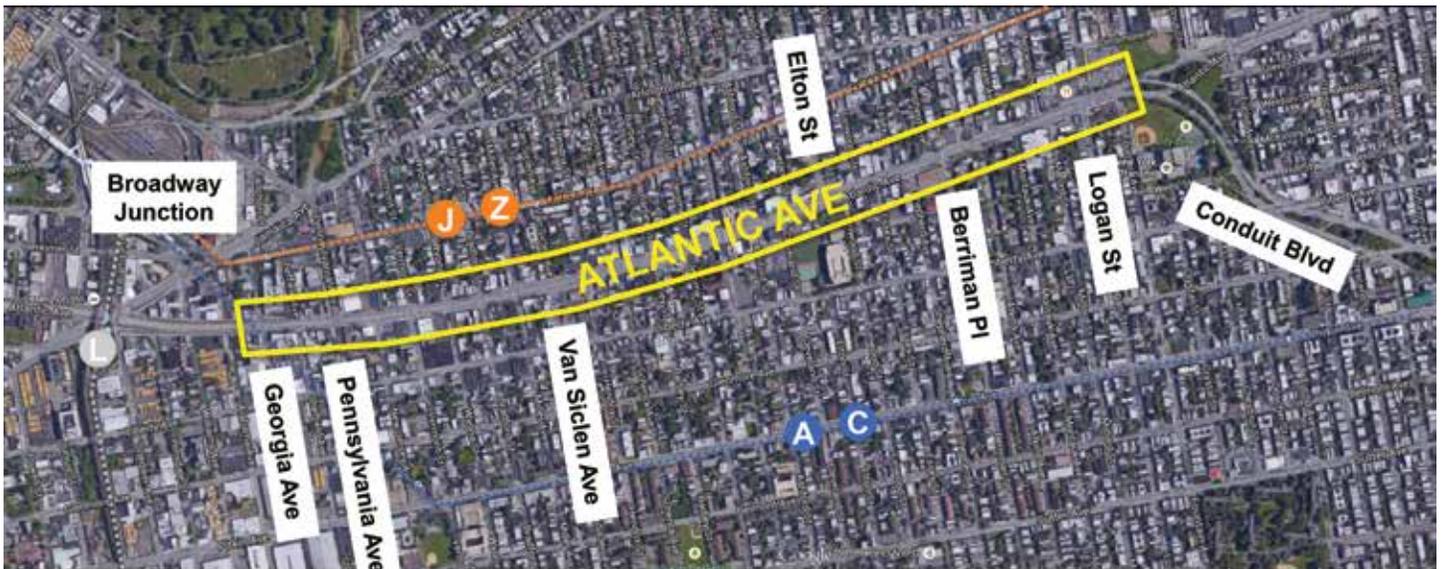
Source: Fatalities: NYCDOT
 Injuries: NYSDOT
 KSI: Persons Killed or Severely Injured

- ❑ Ranks in the top 10 percent of Brooklyn streets for severe injuries and fatalities per mile (2010-2014 crash data)
- ❑ 52 persons killed or severely injured along 1.2 mile corridor since 2010; 29% (15) of which were pedestrians
- ❑ 32% of pedestrians hit when crossing with the signal as opposed to 12% crossing against the signal
- ❑ 47% of pedestrian crashes at uncontrolled intersections
- ❑ Vehicle occupant injuries associated with:
 - Rear end crashes (40%)
 - Sideswipe crashes (18%)
 - Right angle crashes (15%)



Safety Data, Phase I of Atlantic Avenue Great Streets Project, NYC Department of Transportation.⁸

⁷ NYC DOT. (2015). “Brooklyn Pedestrian Safety Action Plan”. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/ped-safety-action-plan-brooklyn.pdf>
⁸ NYC DOT. (2015). “Atlantic Avenue, Phase I: Georgia Ave to Logan St.” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/atlanctic-ave-phase1-proposal-bk-cb5-tc.pdf>



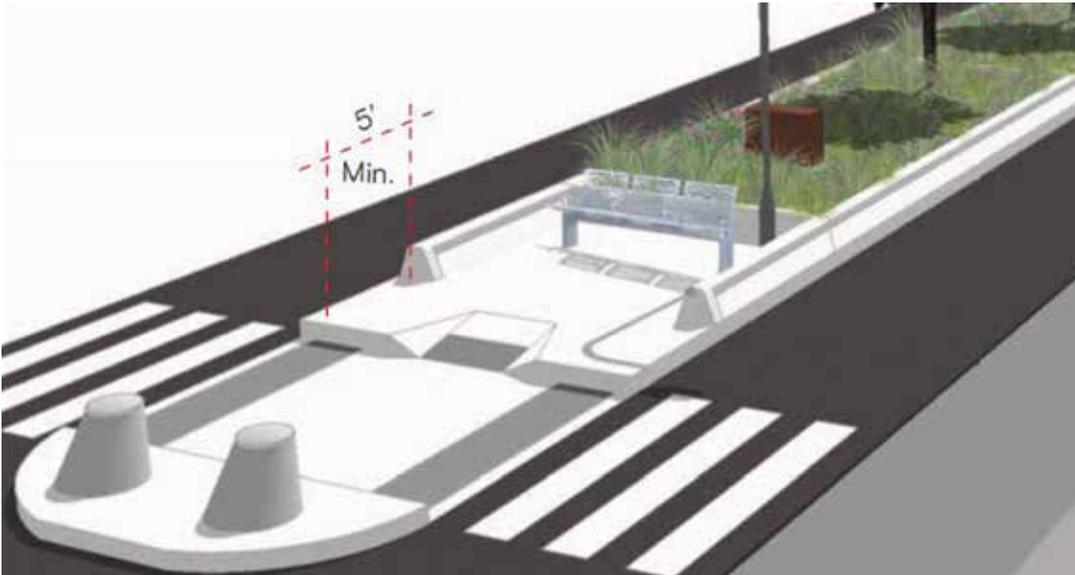
Atlantic Avenue Great Streets Project Area, NYC Department of Transportation.⁹

implemented on Queens Boulevard on the other three “great streets” is unavailable for Atlantic. One hundred million of the \$250 million set aside for the Great Streets initiative will go towards Queens Boulevard repairs, leaving just \$150 million for the remaining three corridors. Despite the small scope of the proposal, the community was hopeful that the Great Streets project would in fact make Atlantic Avenue great again. Unfortunately, the redesign proposals have fallen short of the Vision Zero Great Streets standard set by Queens Boulevard.

The DOT has designated just \$60 million for the two-mile Atlantic Avenue Great Streets project. Just four of the top ten crash intersections on Atlantic Avenue will be addressed by the redesign plan. While the project area does include some high-crash intersections, the project’s mission seems to be driven by the administration’s other non-traffic related priorities: The majority of the proposal is in East New York, where the de Blasio administration has committed to spur housing growth.

But what’s most problematic about the DOT’s Atlantic Avenue plan is its marginal impact on improving safety. Phase I of the plan, which stretches from Georgia Avenue to Logan Street, calls for extended pedestrian medians, bell bollards for protection, raised existing medians to decrease mid-block crossings, median extensions, new left-turn bays and curb extensions “where feasible.” **Many of these interventions are designed to protect pedestrians from dangerous drivers, instead of implementing changes that would fundamentally alter dangerous driving behavior, such as protected bike lanes, widened sidewalks and medians, decreased traffic lane width and other complete street innovations.** Despite the community’s disappointment in the phase I design proposal, construction is slated to begin in the spring of 2017.

9 NYC DOT. (2015). “Atlantic Avenue Capital Project: Vision Zero Great Streets” <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2015-06-15-atlantic-ave-cb5.pdf>



Rendering of raised medians planned for Atlantic Avenue, NYC Department of Transportation.¹⁰

While phase II of the project - from Logan Street to Rockaway Boulevard - has been announced, the DOT will first seek community input for the areas near Euclid Avenue, Logan Street and City Line Park. Hopefully the life-saving complete street elements that are missing from the phase I design will be incorporated into phase II plans based on much-needed community input.

Atlantic Avenue was named a priority corridor and a Vision Zero Great Street to begin with because of the high number of KSI crashes that occur on the corridor. To fix one small section of this highly dangerous avenue would simply shift the burden of traffic crashes from one economically-disadvantaged neighborhood to another. It's time that the DOT address long-held concerns about safety on Atlantic Avenue and deliver on the safe streets infrastructure the entire Atlantic Avenue corridor deserves.

10 NYC DOT. (2015). "Atlantic Avenue Capital Project Vision Zero Great Streets." <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dot/downloads/pdf/2015-06-15-atlantic-ave-cb5.pdf>

Conclusion

This brief report reflects on Atlantic Avenue's long history of traffic crash and safety issues and revives the call for an equitable, effective "Great Street" redesign on the corridor. DOT's current plan to address crashes on a small segment of this long, dangerous street will shift the burden of traffic crashes from one 2-mile segment to the next, which is why Transportation Alternatives is calling for a corridor-wide redesign proposal that includes complete streets innovations proven to save lives, including protected bike lanes, narrowed traffic lanes, and leading pedestrian intervals.

Atlantic Avenue is Brooklyn's main street, and the Vision Zero Great Streets project is an opportunity for New York City to engage with and address the public health issues and equity concerns that have marginalized and endangered Atlantic Avenue residents for too long.

