



Alfonso A. Casitto

You reach morning transportation for Tuesday since 2018. Each week I'll bring you insights about Long Island's dangerous roads, along with in-depth news, reporting and analysis from our reporters' reports. Reach out with tips, questions or suggestions at casitto@newsday.com



Newsday's investigation reporter Alfonso A. Casitto and his family in the back of a pickup truck in Ecuador in 2014. Credit: Courtesy of Alfonso A. Casitto

While being chauffeured around Ecuador by some of my cousins years ago, I quickly got up to speed on some of Guayaquil's peculiar driving practices.

- It's not unusual to see mothers holding babies while riding on the backs of motorcycles.
- Stopping at red lights after dark in some neighborhoods is not always advised.
- There's plenty of space for passengers in the bed of the pickup.

As strange as I found some of Ecuador's rules of the road, one in particular I thought, actually made a lot of sense. I learned it while walking into the path of a slowly approaching car in a shopping mall parking lot — as we Americans routinely do back home. My cousin quickly advised me never to do that again.

"We always let the cars pass first," she said. "You can't assume a car will stop for you over here."

While, officially, the city of Guayaquil's laws on issues of right-of-way aren't much different from ours, in practice, many pedestrians know to err on the side of caution. The logic is simple: In the event of a crash, the issue of legal liability doesn't really matter much if the pedestrian doesn't live to see the court date.

I flash back to my cousin's sage advice every time I drive on Merrick Road in my Valley Stream neighborhood and watch a pedestrian precariously standing in the middle of the road — far from a crosswalk — while cars whip by inches from them in both directions, often in the dark. Like that old '90s arcade game Frogger, they try to carve out a route to the other side of the street, even if it means stepping in front of moving vehicles.

In some ways, the fact that some pedestrians feel so confident about their safety while doing something so patently unsafe is a testament to how careful most motorists are. A jaywalker knows he will probably make it across the street unscathed, as long as a driver has enough time to react.

But what happens when they don't? Then you get stories like that of Pierre Angelo Rodriguez, who was fatally struck by a bus in 2021 while jaywalking across the street midblock to catch a different bus. The Hempstead neighborhood where he was killed was the single most dangerous area for pedestrians and cyclists from 2019 to 2023, according to a [Newsday analysis](#).

Like in Guayaquil, the dangers to pedestrians in Hempstead are more pronounced than in other communities because many residents don't own cars. Local leaders in Hempstead are employing several strategies to address the problem, including improved road signage, increased police enforcement, traffic guards and public messages about the dangers of jaywalking.

And pedestrians themselves have a critical role to play in staying safe. Although Rodriguez's mother, Gina Varela, has filed a lawsuit alleging that negligence by the bus operator and other defendants contributed to her son's death, she's also urged pedestrians walking at night to wear bright clothes.

As I learned in that mall parking lot, it's not about blaming victims. It's about doing everything you can to avoid becoming one.

Readers speak up

This week's email comes from a reader who believes modern technology could be better used to stop dangerous drivers.

The only way the accidents and deaths can be avoided is by using drones on the LI and Grand Central/Bohannon State Parkway. Anyone driving more than the speed limit and zig zagging in the road should be given heavy fines. They not only put their own lives in danger, but other people's lives also.

Umar Shah, Kew Gardens, Queens

What are other ways that tech could be employed to make our streets safer? Send your ideas to roads@newsday.com.

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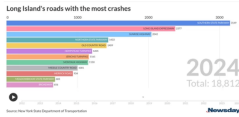


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