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New York's Sidewalks Are So Packed, Pedestrians Are Taking to the Streets

By WINNIE HU JUNE 30, 2016

Ivette Singh hardly bothers to walk on the sidewalk on her way to work in Midtown Manhattan anymore. Too many people, too little space. Not enough patience.

Instead, Ms. Singh can be found on the wrong side of the curb as she makes her way from Pennsylvania Station to her job on Third Avenue near 40th Street, and then back again. She prefers dodging yellow cabs and bicyclists to navigating sidewalks teeming with commuters, tourists and cart-pushing vendors, all jostling for elbow room.

“I don’t mind the walk, it’s just the people,” Ms. Singh, an account coordinator for the Univision television network, said. “Sometimes, they’re rude. They’re on top of you, no personal space. They’re smoking. It’s tough.”

Ms. Singh is just one among many pedestrians experiencing a growing phenomenon in New York City: sidewalk gridlock.

While crowding is hardly a new problem in the city, the sidewalks that cemented New York’s reputation as a world-class walking city have become obstacle courses as more people than ever live and work in the city and tourism surges. The problem is particularly acute in Manhattan. Around Penn Station and the Port Authority Bus

Terminal, two of the city's main transit hubs, commuters clutching coffee cups and briefcases squeeze by one another during the morning and evening rushes. Throngs of shoppers and visitors sometimes bring swaths of Lower Manhattan to a standstill, prompting some local residents to cite clogged sidewalks as their biggest problem in a recent community survey.

Foot traffic has slowed to a shuffle along some of the city's most famous corridors. On Fifth Avenue, between 54th and 55th Streets, 26,831 pedestrians — enough to fill Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall combined — passed through in three hours on a weekday in May 2015, up from 20,639 the year before, according to city data.

Transportation officials are taking measures to alleviate the congestion. To help accommodate foot traffic, they are adding more pedestrian plazas across the city, expanding the presence of a streetscape feature first embraced by the administration of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. One is scheduled to open soon on 33rd Street near Penn Station. There are also plans to widen a half-dozen sidewalks in Flushing, Queens, in the next year (the city's sidewalks vary in width, but must be at least five feet wide).

While a crowded sidewalk is simply a symptom of a crowded city, it resonates deeply because it affects almost everyone. Unlike overstuffed subways or tourist attractions like, say, Times Square, there is no going around the sidewalks. They are to New York what freeways are to Los Angeles: an essential part of the infrastructure. Sidewalks not only get people from Point A to Point B, but also serve as a shared public space for rich and poor, native and tourist alike.

“Sidewalks are the unifying glue of the city,” said Mitchell L. Moss, director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University. “It’s the one part of the city that everyone has to use. You cannot avoid sidewalks.”

Crowded sidewalks are not just a New York problem. They have created bottlenecks and logistical hurdles and have raised safety concerns in cities across the country. Since 2013, public works officials in San Francisco have widened two sidewalks in Fisherman's Wharf and the Castro, popular tourist areas with a lot of

foot traffic. A third sidewalk project is planned for Second Street, one of the main routes to AT&T Park, the baseball stadium where the Giants play.

In Seattle, a busy stretch of East Pike Street in the Capitol Hill neighborhood that is lined with restaurants, bars and clubs was closed to cars on three Saturday nights last summer to make room for pedestrians overflowing from the sidewalks. “It just feels so jammed with humanity it becomes a rough situation,” said Joel Sisolak, sustainability and planning director for Capitol Hill Housing, a community development corporation that has worked with city officials to address the issue of crowded sidewalks.

Space on New York’s sidewalks is at a premium at a time when the city’s population of 8.5 million is higher than ever. Add in the record 59.7 million visitors who are expected to descend on the city this year, up from 48.8 million in 2010, and it is a recipe for thoroughfares packed like sardine cans. Chris Heywood, a spokesman for NYC & Company, which oversees the city’s tourism efforts, said his group was increasingly highlighting attractions outside Manhattan in hopes of dispersing visitors.

Scott Gastel, a spokesman for the city’s Transportation Department, said it had conducted research into pedestrian behavior at crosswalks and had monitored pedestrian volumes at 100 street locations to track long-term trends in neighborhood commercial corridors. Along bustling 34th Street, the city has added about 20,000 square feet of pedestrian space in recent years, including so-called bus bulbs that extend the sidewalk pavement to give bus riders more room to wait.

In Lower Manhattan, overcrowded sidewalks topped the list of residents’ concerns in a survey conducted last year for the local community board. The problem was aggravated in some areas by sidewalk clutter such as construction scaffolding, large garbage bags, vendors and fixtures like lights, signs, newsstands, benches, planters and recycling bins. “You add all that up, and it’s difficult to walk on the narrow sidewalk,” said Catherine McVay Hughes, the community board’s chairwoman, whose term ended on Thursday.

If there is an epicenter of crowded sidewalks in New York, it is near Penn Station, where pedestrians, food carts and newsstands all vie for space. Only London

and Tokyo have sidewalks as congested, said Daniel A. Biederman, president of the 34th Street Partnership, which oversees the business district in the area. As many as 14,000 pedestrians an hour walk in front of the Modell's Sporting Goods store on Seventh Avenue near West 34th Street, according to 2015 data collected by the partnership.

The commuter crowd is also growing. An average of 92,314 riders boarded New Jersey Transit trains at Penn Station each weekday in fiscal year 2015, up from 79,891 riders in fiscal year 2010. In the same period, average weekday boardings on New Jersey Transit buses at the Port Authority terminal also increased, to 78,006 riders from 72,506.

Veteran pedestrians have tried to adapt. They shoulder their way into bike lanes or walk purposefully on the street alongside cars — eyes ahead, earphones in — forming a de facto express lane. They move en masse along Seventh and Eighth Avenues like a storm system on a weather map, heading north in the mornings and south in the evenings.

“You know how the system works,” said Roque Santos, 48, a stagehand who commutes daily from Jersey City. “I cross the street even before the light changes to beat the crowd.”

Peter Raskin, a sports marketing executive, has made walking in the street part of his daily routine. He zipped north on Seventh Avenue the other morning, even when there was room on the sidewalk. “I’m used to it,” he said. “I stay in the street with my head down.”

In 2016, there had been 55 pedestrian fatalities as of Sunday, an improvement from the 79 fatalities for the same period in 2013.

Michael D’Angelo, an accountant who works in Midtown, said that in the past year he had seen a half-dozen pedestrians walking in the street struck by cyclists. Still, Mr. D’Angelo said he often had no choice but to step off the curb because he could not get by all the people along Eighth Avenue. His bus home to Pennsylvania leaves Port Authority at 5:55 p.m., with or without him.

“Everybody is trying to beat everybody,” he said, “because everybody has someplace to go.”

Then there are the inattentive walkers, those who text on their phones or read newspapers while moving, and the meandering tourists who seem oblivious to the ways of the street. They stop midstride, step on someone’s heel or cut off people without warning. The result? Sidewalk rage.

“When you get out-of-towners and New Yorkers, it’s like mixing Clorox with ammonia, it doesn’t work — there’s a chemical reaction,” said Jato Jenkins, a street worker, as he swept a stretch of Seventh Avenue. “The New Yorkers walk their normal route, and the out-of-towners are going the opposite direction, like salmon going upstream.”

Mr. Jenkins said everyone was miserable and on edge, especially in the sweltering summer months, so that even the slightest bump could set off tempers. He said he had seen women cursing at each other and men pushing each other and grabbing each other’s shirts.

Virginia Garcia said she had been on the receiving end of such outbursts. “People are running around like crazy, and they don’t stop,” said Ms. Garcia, who stands at the intersection of Seventh Avenue and West 36th Street with a sign advertising a local pub. “They push you, they hit you and they don’t care.”

David Wentz, a mail carrier who pushes a 50-pound cart around the garment district, said he tried to arrange his day around the busiest times for foot traffic. “It’s chaotic,” he said. “It’s like Disney World down here.”

But for Mr. Moss, of the Rudin Center at N.Y.U., crowded sidewalks show how far the city has come. During the 1970s, he pointed out, people used to avoid the sidewalks in the East Village and other neighborhoods for a different reason: They feared criminals and felt safer walking out in the open, down the middle of a street.

Today, “people want to be in New York,” he said. “A crowded sidewalk is a sign of vitality.”

Samantha Schmidt contributed reporting.

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