

Peer Exchange: Media Framing and Advocacy

“My community is energized about pedestrian and bicycle safety! Where do we go from here?”

On February 1, 2023, SafeTREC held the second session of the 2023 Peer Exchange Program, “My community is energized about pedestrian and bicycle safety! Where do we go from here?” Twenty-three participants from urban and rural communities throughout Northern, Central, and Southern California attended the virtual event to discuss the topic “Media Framing and Advocacy.”

Peer Exchange Overview

Over the last five years, SafeTREC and California Walks have conducted 119 CPBST workshops statewide. The Peer Exchange Program is a three-part webinar series for individuals, community agencies, and governmental agencies interested in furthering ideas and actions that surfaced in past [Community Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Trainings](#) (CPBST) or [Comunidades Activas y Seguras \(Active and Safe Communities\)](#) (CAyS) program trainings. Other stakeholders interested in pedestrian and bicycle safety programming are also invited to join the webinars.

The purpose of this webinar was to:

- Bring together peers to learn about media framing and advocacy for road safety;
- Engage in discussions related to how pedestrian and bicycle crashes are framed in the media; and
- Identify strategies and resources for effectively communicating about road safety with the media, journalists or members of the public.

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A Public Health Crisis

Lisa Peterson, Communications and Outreach Lead at SafeTREC, introduced the topic by reporting the staggering fact that nearly 43,000 people died in the United States from traffic crashes in 2021 alone ([NHTSA, May 2022](#)). That year, 7,342 people walking were killed, and there were 985 bicyclist fatalities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes motor vehicle crashes as a leading cause of death amongst people ages one to 75, and the leading cause of death for children, youth, and young adults ages five to 24 ([CDC, September 2022](#)).

These are not just numbers– they are family members, children, and neighbors. And each loss is unacceptable and preventable. And yet, there seems to be a lack of urgency and public outcry about this crisis.

Emerging research has identified one important part of this problem...how traffic crashes are covered in the media. Studies show that how the media reports about traffic injuries and fatalities, especially for vulnerable road users like people walking and biking, significantly influences public perceptions of the problem, how policymakers should respond, and what policies are implemented ([Goddard et al, 2019](#)).

Table 1.

Status quo	Better practice	Effect of status quo
Accident: “ <i>Pedestrian killed in accident on Main Street.</i> ”	Crash: “ <i>Pedestrian killed in crash on Main Street.</i> ”	Obscures preventable nature of crashes
Non-agentive: “ <i>A pedestrian was hit and killed.</i> ” (no agent)	Agentive: “ <i>A pedestrian was hit and killed by a car.</i> ”	Obscures role of a human actor
Focus on pedestrian: “ <i>A pedestrian was hit and killed by a car.</i> ”	Focus on vehicle: “ <i>A car hit and killed a pedestrian.</i> ”	Increases blame for the focus of the sentence
Object-based language: “ <i>A car jumped the curb.</i> ”	Person-based language: “ <i>A driver drove over the curb.</i> ”	Obscures role of a human actor
Counterfactual statements: “ <i>The pedestrian darted into the street.</i> ”	Not included	Increases perceived blame for the victim
Episodic framing: Treats the crash as an isolated incident.	Thematic framing: “ <i>This is the tenth fatal collision this year.</i> ”	Prevents readers from connecting the dots between incidents and thus shifts attention to individual-level rather than systematic solutions

Source: Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen, Iacobucci (2019)

How are pedestrian and bicyclist crashes framed in the media?

In their 2019 paper, "[Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions?](#)" researchers Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen and Laobucci conducted a study to identify how different editorial patterns in traffic crash reporting influence public perceptions of road safety. They found that media narratives frequently refer to crashes as "accidents", a term that conveys the incident as somehow inevitable and unpreventable. Coverage also tends to shift the blame away from the driver and towards the victim, and treats the crash as an isolated incident, rather than a pattern of occurrences on that roadway or in that neighborhood. This type of "episodic" coverage focuses on the role of the individual and obscures or leaves out entirely the context of the crash (Was there adequate lighting for the pedestrian or enough time to cross? Were there bike lanes for the person biking?). In addition, reports often ascribe agency to vehicles, using language like "a car hit and killed a pedestrian" or "A car jumped the curb" rather than reporting and naming the driver of the car as responsible for the behavior. As noted in the study's Table 1, a better practice would be to use more agentive language, such as "A driver drove over the curb" which clearly names the driver as the responsible party, rather than the vehicle, a practice that could reinforce the principle of shared responsibility, an important component of a [Safe System](#).

Why framing is important

Framing matters. What we say and how we say it influences how people make sense of what they hear. According to the FrameWorks Institute, frames are the choices we make in terms of what we emphasize, how and what we explain, and what we leave unsaid ([FrameWorks Institute](#)). The effects of these choices are also evident in media coverage of crashes. For the Goddard 2019 study, the authors shared three different versions of a news story

with readers about a crash between a driver and a pedestrian. The first version showed the typical framing, with object-based language and use of the word "accident" (episodic framing) while the second version made improved word choices. The third version took the framing a step further by introducing more of the road safety context, such as noting a pattern of pedestrians killed at the same location over the last year (thematic framing).

In each story, the facts of the incident were the same. What differed is how readers perceived blame and how supportive they were of potential solutions. For the typical coverage, readers placed more responsibility for the crash on the person walking and were also less likely to support safety improvements. After reading the stories that utilized more thematic framing, readers were less likely to blame the victim (the person walking) and more likely to support road safety improvements like pedestrian infrastructure and slower speeds.

Applying a Safe System lens

The national consortium [Collaborative Sciences Center for Road Safety](#) (CSCRS), developed a media framing guide (October 2022) to include step-by-step guidance, tips, and examples for professionals to use effective messaging strategies to reframe crash reporting, and help build public knowledge and support for a Safe System Approach. In addition to the guide, they have created a helpful one page summary guide with strategies that can be used to make those shifts in messaging (Figure 1). Together with the information in this chart, and the matrix in Table 1, these resources support framing traffic injury in a broader context, allowing for more areas to intervene to promote safety.

Reframing crash reporting in news media

Transportation and public health professionals have an important role to play in building public support for addressing road injuries and deaths as a preventable public health crisis. Use the following strategies to change the narrative:

How to reframe the message



1. Choose your target message that reinforces the Safe Systems approach (e.g., risk of speed, separating users in space and time, vehicle design).



2. Appeal to people's concern for others by highlighting the human toll of such tragic events. Acknowledge the harms caused to loved ones and the larger community.



3. Provide context to frame traffic injury as a broader pattern of harm. Speak to the extent of the problem and risk factors that go beyond individual responsibility.



4. Inspire "can-doism" by emphasizing that the problem is something that can be addressed, is preventable, and would benefit everyone. Highlight any local efforts to prevent serious crashes.

How to engage with news media and the public



Be a resource. Notify your communications team or local journalists that you're willing to speak on traffic injury.



Create your own content. Anticipate events, large projects, holiday travel, etc. to share info with the public. Pitch stories, write press releases, and use social media to build support for addressing the problem.



Make a plan. Add a communications agenda item to regular meetings. Identify relevant messages and have a procedure for what will be done and who will be responsible.

For the full media framing guide for transportation and public health professionals, visit www.roadsafety.unc.edu/research/projects/2019r29/



Source: Collaborative Sciences Center for Road Safety, 2022

Discussion

During the discussion portion of the webinar, participants asked about others' experiences reaching out to news organizations and other media sources. Some participants shared that their city's Public Works department hesitates to include crash data and maps in news reports due to a concern about their potential liability if they identify high crash areas. Other participants pointed out that the majority of crash data is public data, thereby accessible to anyone in the community. Local organizations may determine that discussing areas where crashes have occurred, along with measures they are taking to improve those locations, is a positive step toward illustrating a jurisdiction's commitment to safety. UC Berkeley SafeTREC's TIMS website provides public access to maps of crash data for each city, county, and unincorporated area in California.

For promoting interest and awareness, participants discussed coordinating a bicycle ride-along with law enforcement, elected officials, and other decision makers, etc. and then publicizing the event with local news stations and journalists. Regarding specific messaging, participants wondered how to encourage media coverage that centers the need for policy change in order to promote traffic safety.



Resources

- [Editorial Patterns in Bicyclist and Pedestrian Crash Reporting](#) (2019). Ralph, Iacobucci, Thigpen, Goddard
- [Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions? Evidence from an experiment](#) (2019). Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen, Iacobucci
- [Factors and Frames That Shape Public Discourse Around Road User Safety](#) research project (CSCRS, LaJeunesse, Austin) and related resources: [Media Framing Guide](#) and the one page summary, [Reframing crash reporting in news media](#)
- [Intervening at the blotter, not the broadcast: Improving crash coverage by targeting police press releases](#) (2022). Ralph, Goddard, Thigpen, Davis. Related [press release guide](#).
- [From Victim-Blaming to Solutions: Online Toolkit for Changing the Narrative About Traffic Crashes](#) (Pedal Love)
- [Vision Zero Reporting](#)
- [Road Collision Reporting Guidelines](#) (University of Westminster)
- [Role of Media and Road Safety](#) (CATSIP)
- [CSCRS Research to Practice Webinar Series](#)
- [Opening Our Eyes to the Truth of Mobility Safety w/ Tom Flood](#) (NSC 3/2/23 webinar)
- [Media Advocacy 101](#) and [Framing 101](#) (Berkeley Media Studies Group)
- [Changing the Conversation on Social Issues](#) (FrameWorks Institute)
- [Why do words matter when we talk about traffic injury?](#) (UCB SafeTREC)
- [Go Safely Safe System Toolkit](#) (California Office of Traffic Safety)

Berkeley SafeTREC

About the CPBSP

The Community Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Program (CPBSP) is a statewide active transportation and community engagement project of UC Berkeley Safe Transportation Research and Education Center (SafeTREC) and California Walks (Cal Walks). It uses an adapted Safe System Approach to engage residents and advocates to develop an action plan to improve active transportation safety in their communities, support complete streets planning, and strengthen collaboration with local officials and agency staff.

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