**DID YOU KNOW???**

**HOW CRASHES ARE REPORTED INFLUENCES ATTITUDES**

News stories often play a key role in shaping public understanding of traffic safety. And when news stories victim-blame or fail to convey the larger context in which these crashes take place, they do deep injustice to the victims and the conversation about road safety in general. Two new studies on inaccuracy and subtle bias in mainstream-media reporting about driver-cyclist crashes highlight the extent of these issues. What they show makes clear how deeply rooted the problem is – and how difficult it will be to fix. While these studies concentrated on bicyclist/vehicle crashes, the wording of the crashes in the media can be just as easily applied to vehicle/pedestrian crashes or to vehicle-to-vehicle crashes.

Passive language was widespread. The university group's research examined media reports on 200 crashes nationwide where cyclists or pedestrians died or were seriously injured, and it found that in 80 percent of them, the main actor in the crash was described as a vehicle—not as a person. "Sometimes the story would say that the person was hit by a car, which is passive," says Tara Goddard, an assistant professor of urban planning at Texas A&M, who was involved in the study. This language distances the driver's actions from the crash. Many of these stories also still referred to crashes as accidents, despite the rise of the Crash Not Accident traffic-safety-awareness campaign.

The studies also looked at whether reports contained what the researchers called a counterfactual: a detail that subtly shifts blame, such as noting that the victim "was not wearing a helmet" or "was wearing dark clothing." In the university group's study, 48 percent of the examined stories included such a statement, which, without important context, suggested the victim was at least partly at fault. "Dark clothing is irrelevant if the driver is distracted," says Goddard, "and a helmet will not save you if the driver hits you at 60 miles per hour.

Even when police are diligent in their jobs, the inherent tension between law enforcement's need for a careful investigation over time and the media's interest in reporting breaking news creates problems. Julie Bond, a CUTR researcher, says that in Florida, her findings indicate that police almost never cite a driver in a crash based on a preliminary investigation (the broad exceptions are DUIs and hit-and-runs). Media stories based on those reports often mention the driver wasn't charged but fail to add that the investigation is ongoing, "so people say, 'Oh, the driver wasn't cited, so it must have been the cyclist's fault,'" she says. Even after the investigation wraps up, police can be reluctant to file charges. A recent report from the Bicycle Coalition of Philadelphia looked at every bicyclist, pedestrian, and motorcyclist fatality in 2017 and 2018 in the city—95 deaths in all—and found that in the 51 cases for which data was available, charges were filed less than a third of the time. The true figure is likely even lower; no data was available in 44 cases.

So is this a legitimate problem, and if it is, what can be done about it? Mitchell Byars, a reporter for the Boulder, Colorado *Daily Camera* newspaper has covered crime and the courts for more than 14 years, including a decade at the *Camera*. "Usually we hear about crashes one of three ways," he says: police scanner, police-blotter reports, or witness reports. It's rare for reporters to respond directly to a crash scene, and while witnesses are sometimes available after the fact, "a lot of times, initially, we're relying on those police reports," Byars says. That's in large part due to limited staffing. Newspapers

in general have seen steep job losses in the last decade, and nowhere have those losses been more keenly felt than at community newspapers like we have in Franklin County.

So the next time you read about some traffic crash that results in injuries or death, try to look deeper into the root cause of the crash, bearing in mind that it really wasn't just an "accident" – it really could and should never have happened.