MEDIA ADVISORY
Contact: Melissa Balmer
Pedal Love Media Outreach & Advocacy for Active Mobility
melissa@pedalllove.org
(360) 265-2883

For immediate release

First-of-its-kind research shows how victim-blaming in news stories about traffic crashes shapes readers’ perceptions of roadway safety

With last week’s report by the Governors Highway Safety Association predicting that 2019 will mark a 30-year high in pedestrian traffic deaths, it’s time to look for new solutions to improve the safety of the most vulnerable roadway users, people who walk and ride bikes. Does word choice and framing of news stories factors affect public perceptions about roadway safety?

New, first-of-its-kind research shows that they do. The findings demonstrate that comparatively small editorial choices in news reports about traffic crashes that involve pedestrians influence the way readers perceive who bears responsibility and how much they support preferred safety improvements.

Tara Goddard of Texas A&M, Kelcie Ralph and Evan Iacobucci at Rutgers, and Calvin Thigpen formerly of Arizona State University measured reader responses to three versions of a news story about a hypothetical traffic crash in which a driver hit and killed a pedestrian, each with minor differences in word choice and framing, as well as contextual information about roadway conditions and a history of similar crashes.

Those who read the version that focused mainly on the pedestrian and made little or no mention of the car, the driver or contextual details, were most likely to blame the victim for causing the crash, recommended relatively low penalties for the driver, and assigned relatively lower priority to safety improvements such as additional crosswalks and street lighting.

The findings, published in the paper Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions? Evidence from an experiment, recommend that journalists use the term “crash” in place of “accident,” which obscures possible causes, and avoid phrases like “the car jumped the curb and killed a pedestrian,” which focuses on the car while absolving the driver of any role. Instead, the researchers recommend a phrase like “the driver drove over the curb,” which focuses on the person behind the action.

“Simple improvements in crash reporting can help the public view traffic crashes as a preventable public health issue, rather than just unfortunate but isolated events,” said Goddard, Texas A&M assistant professor of urban planning.

Join us for an online briefing for journalists, news editors and advocates with authors Tara Goddard and Kelcie Ralph on Wednesday, March 11, 2020, 11-11:30 AM Pacific Daylight Time. The briefing will include an overview of the research and findings and Q&A. Instructions on how to attend are found at http://www.anymeeting.com/PlID=EE53DD89854830

The findings and what they say about public support for safety improvements are relevant to efforts to enable more people to walk or bike for short trips as ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the U.S. transportation sector, the single largest source in the U.S.

Read the complete study, including the authors’ recommendations for journalists, at http://www.pedalllove.org/from-victim-blaming-to-solutions

In mid-April Pedal Love will host a webinar for advocates for walking and biking on the findings and how they can be applied as part of an advocacy strategy.

For an interview with Tara Goddard and Kelcie Ralph prior to the media briefing, please contact Melissa Balmer at melissa@pedalllove.org.

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