

# POLICY STATEMENT

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ASSOCIATION OF PEDESTRIAN  
& BICYCLE PROFESSIONALS

*Expertise for Active Transportation*



## POLICY STATEMENT: VICTIM BLAMING

***\*This policy is reordering the sections:***

*(Old: Position - Definition - Application - Recommendations - Resources)*

*(New: Position - Recommendations - Definition - Application - Resources)*

### **Overview of APBP Policy Statements**

The Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (APBP) supports the community of professionals working to create more walkable, bikeable places through facilitating the exchange of professional and technical knowledge and by promoting fundamental positions that are broadly acknowledged and acted upon by APBP members.

#### APBP Policy Principles:

1. APBP represents the professional expertise and practical experience of its members in transportation policy discussions to advance active, healthy, and sustainable communities.
2. APBP recognizes the impacts of systemic and institutionalized racism, and we recognize our responsibility to identify and address inequities.
3. APBP endorses active transportation as an integral part of transportation systems through all stages of planning, design, funding, and implementation.
4. APBP supports connected, convenient, accessible, and safe streets and pathways in every community and planning with the input of every member of a community.
5. APBP advances a safe system approach that leverages active transportation to create equitable access for everyone in every place.

### **Position**

APBP believes it is our professional duty to make it safe for people to travel in their community, requiring us to incorporate this duty into our work wherever possible by shifting the conversation to systematic safety improvements, rather than trying to identify a party at fault; or worse, finding fault or blaming a crash on the actions of those typically most vulnerable - those road users outside of a car.

APBP encourages professional practitioners (such as traffic and transportation engineers and agency

officials), as well as law enforcement and media to avoid reporting on crashes involving pedestrians, bicyclists and other vulnerable travelers in a way that places any blame on them for the traffic violence they suffer, especially when they are using a dangerously designed system shaped by our auto-dependent culture that does not adequately consider their needs nor the context of the street. APBP supports developing a different mindset about crashes that is reflected in a new vocabulary with comprehensive descriptions in police crash reports, local government publications and presentations, and reporting by the media.

APBP supports [Vision Zero](#) and its use of a Safe System view of traffic crashes. The Safe System approach recognizes human imperfections, shared responsibility, and demands systems be designed with those human qualities in mind. This approach, used in other transportation sectors such as for railroad and airline crashes, places primary responsibility on those who design the systems where people are harmed rather than the users of the systems.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. APBP will strive to reframe the public story related to crashes as thematic instead of episodic, by incorporating the story told by all people into its policies, programs, and activities non-victim-blaming language, Vision Zero principles, and a Safe System approach to transportation infrastructure planning, design, and operation.
2. APBP members will help the media to move away from victim-blaming crash reporting and move to comprehensive, unbiased crash reporting by providing a better understanding of street design and crash trends and patterns. APBP members will encourage the media to portray driver actions in crashes in the active tense instead of focusing on details about the vehicle and considering the driver a passive participant.
3. APBP encourages jurisdictions to train staff in all departments to use non-victim-blaming language in media releases, crash reporting, and transportation planning and engineering.
4. APBP members will collaborate with other professionals to eliminate conversations that add blame to victims based on race, age, and disability.
5. APBP members will advocate and work with USDOT and other agencies on specific actions to remove victim blaming language from safety/awareness campaigns.

**APBP will reframe the public story told by all people by incorporating into its policies, programs, and activities non-victim-blaming language, Vision Zero principles, and a Safe System approach to transportation infrastructure planning, design, and operation.** As an organization, APBP will reflect its policy by increasing crash reporting accuracy by avoiding victim blaming and by including Vision Zero and a Safe Systems approach into all its work. This approach is consistent with APBP's commitment to equity and inclusion. APBP will reframe the public story told by all people about crashes so that the thematic focus is on the *unsafe system and/or system component* that led to the crash, using active verbs with the clear subject taking those actions (such as driver instead of car), avoid relying solely on the driver's or police officer's views, avoid placing blame on people using modes not usually dangerous to others (i.e. those biking and walking), and include trends and overall

themes.<sup>1</sup>

**APBP members will help the media to move away from victim-blaming crash reporting by providing a better understanding of street design and crash trends and patterns.** In many cases the media may lack the capacity to do more than use information provided in police reports. To mitigate this, APBP members should help the media to recognize *patterns* and *systems* that continue to lead to crashes, instead of reporting on the crash in isolation, or focusing on individual actors involved in the crash.

Reporters should be able to easily reference and link to local crash maps, report who has control over the street's design, include long-term trends of crash frequency and severity, and include examples of similar areas that have been improved to reduce crashes. This can be accomplished through public agency transparency to make this information readily available, easy to locate, and frequently updated by the agencies.

This includes assisting the media to generally not rely on police reports for clear, unbiased perspectives until those reports are improved and taken by people accustomed to traveling on foot or bike. For example, APBP members should encourage reporters to report the size, weight, and speed of vehicles involved; should speeds be unavailable the marked speed limit and any recent data on average vehicle speeds on the streets. Members should encourage reporters to avoid reporting on items that are not generally illegal, such as the color of clothing being worn or whether someone was wearing a helmet, unless also reporting on comparable actions for all modes including drivers (phone usage, etc.). When people involved were attempting to cross a street not in a crosswalk, APBP members should give reporters the average travel time to and from the nearest marked or unmarked crosswalk with lights to assist in understanding why people chose a different crossing location. In addition, APBP members should help inform the public about places where legal crosswalks exist but are not marked.

**APBP encourages jurisdictions to train staff in all departments to use non-victim-blaming language in media releases, crash reporting, and transportation planning and engineering. For example,**

- **Traffic crash investigators** (usually police, ideally people versed in safe road design) should examine the location for contributing factors, and engage with local planners and engineers to look for design decisions that led to crash factors such as unsafe speeds, lack of convenient safe street crossings, or poor lighting. In addition, vehicle characteristics such as driver blind spots, headlight quality, and vehicle size, should also be considered.
- **Police officers** should be trained to have a basic understanding of the dangers of road design. This means that crash reports should use active language and include the perspective of all involved, especially those walking or bicycling. For example, driver's "due care" responsibility is infrequently applied in crash reporting.
- **Police media relations professionals** should redesign their standard crash reporting press release to reflect the language, information, and framing in this document. Descriptions provided by witnesses such as "darted out" or "I didn't see them" should not be included in

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion, see Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen and Iacobucci's article (see Resources)

statements given to the press. The reporting should be more thematic about the site condition facts and should not be focused on statements related to social capital of the crashed parties or be focused on assigning blame for the crash

- **Traffic safety education campaigners** should broaden the conversation from distracted driving, walking, cycling, etc., to more accurately reflect all factors reflecting a crash, e.g., engineering, speed, etc.

**APBP encourages jurisdictions to train staff in engineering and planning departments to use Safe System approaches in their work. For example:**

- **Engineers** should be asked to focus on accepting human failures and take a Safe System approach where speeding traffic is discouraged by design.
- **Engineers and planners** should use a Safe System approach in crash analysis and infrastructure and operations planning. (Consider FHWA Proven Safety Countermeasures)
- **Architects and urban designers** should assume multi-modalism when designing building placement, etc. (Example of a six-lane road with no median islands and key related destinations on both sides)
- **Public Works or Transportation staff** responsible for curbside management should err on the side of vulnerable users' access and safety.
- **Public Works, Transportation, and Planning staff** should design parking lots with built-in and complete walkability and bikeability features.

**APBP members will work with other professionals to refrain from contributing to conversations that add blame to victims based on race, age, and disability.** These characteristics are often raised in crash reporting. Crash discussions should be well-informed by the experiences of people not in power, with the voices of people of various races, ages, and disability status in the room. For example, modal choice can be influenced by the lack of feeling of safety around police, or the discrimination one experiences while walking, biking, or taking transit while Black or otherwise marginalized. Additionally, while age itself can be cited as a problem, the vulnerability of older travelers can be attributed to a system designed only for certain people.

#### **Definitions:**

**Traffic violence** - This is the harm people suffer due to an unforgiving system design. Traffic violence includes injuries ranging from minor to debilitating, as well as death.

**Victim-blaming** - Victims of traffic violence are often blamed for being harmed while participating in the transportation system. This victim-blaming often assumes the most vulnerable person caused the crash.

**Vision Zero** - A strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries, while increasing safe, healthy, equitable mobility for all. Vision Zero endorses a Safe System approach to system design and operation.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://visionzeronetwork.org/about/what-is-vision-zero/>

Safe System - A human-centered approach to vehicle or roadway design and operational changes, seeking safety through a more aggressive use of vehicle or roadway design and operational changes rather than relying primarily on behavioral changes – and by fully integrating the needs of all users (pedestrians, bicyclists, older, younger, disabled, etc.) of the transportation system.<sup>3</sup>

Distracted driving, walking, bicycling, etc. - Activities people engage in while traveling, regardless of mode, that diverts their attention from paying attention from the task of safety and other people traveling around them.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Application:**

**Portland Police Bureau** crash reports use standard language noting the overall context of traffic violence, trends, and frequent contributing factors. Unfortunately, this example still focuses on traveler behavior instead of road design. For example,

*This incident marks the grim milestone of doubling the number of traffic related fatalities as this time last year. This is the 26th traffic fatality for 2021 in the City of Portland. This is a 100% increase over this time last year when there were 13. Despite reduced traffic numbers in 2020 due to COVID-19, it was still our highest number of traffic fatalities in 3 decades.*

*Frequent contributing factors to traffic crashes are speed, impairment by alcohol or drugs, and distracted driving. Please drive sober, pay attention while behind the wheel, and do not exceed the posted speeds.*

**Portland Bureau of Transportation** uses a [safety campaign during daylight savings time](#) to remind all people traveling of safe habits to avoid crashes and injuries.

**Charlotte, NC** includes neutral crash description reporting in the training of new police officers. The training is conducted by the city's Vision Zero program manager. For more information, contact Angela Berry with the Charlotte Department of Transportation.

**Columbus, OH's Vision Zero Plan** acknowledges the impact of victim-blaming language on crash reporting. The City's [Action Plan](#) calls for improving data collection through better reporting language.

The **Associated Press** adopted a statement in 2016 regarding the term crash vs. accident, which does not go far enough:

*accident, crash – Generally acceptable for automobile and other collisions and wrecks. However, when negligence is claimed or proven, avoid accident, which can be read by some as a term exonerating the person responsible. In such cases, use crash, collision or other terms. See collide, collision. [https://www.apstylebook.com/blog\\_posts/5](https://www.apstylebook.com/blog_posts/5)*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ite.org/technical-resources/topics/safe-systems/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving>

<https://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/04/04/associated-press-cautions-journalists-that-crashes-arent-always-accidents/>

**Resources:**

Kelcie Ralph <https://transfersmagazine.org/magazine-article/opinion-to-save-lives-lets-cover-crashes-better/>

Goddard, T., Ralph, K., Thigpen, C., & Iacobucci, E. (2019). "Does News Coverage Affect Perceived Blame and Preferred Solutions? Evidence from an Experiment" *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2019.100073>

Ralph, K., Iacobucci, E., Goddard, T., & Thigpen, C. (2019). "Editorial patterns in Bicyclist and Pedestrian Crash Reporting" *Transportation Research Record*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361198119825637>

<https://mobilitylab.org/2018/04/16/we-blame-pedestrians-for-dying-even-when-drivers-are-at-fault/>

Top Ten Things News Gets Wrong about Crash Reports, Evan Manvel

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080207061958/http://www.bta4bikes.org/btablog/2006/09/18/top-ten-things-news-gets-wrong-about-crash-reports/>

Scheffels, E., Bond, J., & Monteagut, L. (2019). "Framing the Bicyclist: A Qualitative Study of Media Discourse about Fatal Bicycle Crashes." *Transportation Research Record*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361198119839348>

**APBP's policy statement development process/member participation**

The Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (APBP) relied on widely available information and tools to draft this policy statement. APBP sought comments on a draft policy statement from its Policy Committee members and Equity and Inclusion Committee members. APBP's Board of Directors approved the statement on June 16, 2022. APBP members can suggest changes to any policy statement by contacting the association's executive director, policy committee chair, or a board member. For more information, contact: Lauren Santangelo, Executive Director, at [lsantangelo@amrms.com](mailto:lsantangelo@amrms.com).