

POLICY STATEMENT



ASSOCIATION OF PEDESTRIAN
& BICYCLE PROFESSIONALS

Expertise for Active Transportation

POLICY STATEMENT: VICTIM BLAMING

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 focusing the conversation on systematic safety improvements, rather than only trying to identify a party at fault. We especially prioritize avoiding finding faults with or blaming crashes on the actions of those typically most vulnerable (those road users outside of a motor vehicle).

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 undue 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 or 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 and shared responsibility, and requires that systems be designed with those human qualities in mind. APBP recognizes that designers, policy makers, system operators, and system users share in this responsibility. As a group of practitioners, APBP acknowledges the responsibility to promote safe design.

Recommendations:

In Brief:

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. APBP will employ 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, vehicle 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. Specifically, it is important not to anthropomorphize vehicles; for example, a report should state that “the driver ran the red light,” not “the car ran the red light.”
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 communications and analyses 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.

In Depth:

1. 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 encouraging crash-reporting accuracy that avoids victim blaming and by promoting Vision Zero and a Safe System approach. APBP members will help 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. When relevant, it may also be useful to emphasize the importance of safe driving behaviors, such as not texting, speeding, or driving under the influence. Some strategies may include using active verbs that clearly identify the subject of the action (for example, identify the driver instead of the car); avoiding relying solely on the driver’s or police officer’s views; avoiding placing undue blame on people walking, bicycling, or using other active modes; and discussing trends and overall themes when reporting on crashes.¹

2. APBP members will help the media to move away from victim-blaming crash reporting by providing a better understanding of street design, vehicle design, and crash trends and patterns. In many cases the

¹ For more discussion, see Goddard, Ralph, Thigpen and Iacobucci’s article (see “Resources”).

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.

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 agency.

This includes assisting the media to not necessarily rely exclusively on police reports for unbiased perspectives. For example, APBP members should encourage reporters to report the size, weight, design problems (such as significant blind zones for drivers of certain vehicles), and speed of vehicles involved. Should speeds be unavailable, then reference should be made to the marked speed limit and any recent data on average vehicle speeds on the streets. APBP members should also encourage the media to report when crashes involve illegal actions including distracted driving, road rage, excessive speed, or operating a motor vehicle under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

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 bike helmet. When people involved were attempting to cross a street not in an obvious crosswalk, APBP members should educate reporters regarding the legality of people crossing at places that are not marked (this will vary by state), as well as the average travel time to and from the nearest marked crosswalk with illumination, 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. For example, in some communities crosswalks are legally implied (when not specifically marked) if there are sidewalks on both sides of the street that a marked crosswalk would connect, and in other places, people may cross a street if there is not a marked crosswalk within a certain distance.

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. 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 and safe street crossings, or poor lighting. In addition, vehicle characteristics such as driver blind spots, headlight quality, and vehicle size should also be considered.
- **Law enforcement 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. Officers should also be trained to report whether the driver exercised "due care" appropriate for the conditions.
- **Police media-relations professionals** should design 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 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 on assigning blame for the crash.
- **Traffic-safety advocates** should broaden the conversation beyond dangerous motorist behavior such as distracted driving and drunken driving to reflect *additional* factors influencing crashes, for example, roadway engineering that does not adequately protect vulnerable road users and/or encourages unsafe motorist behavior such as speeding.

- **Outside perspectives/transparency:** Consider adding investigators outside of the police department (to work in collaboration with law enforcement during crash investigations) to increase perspectives, transparency, and the amount of data available so those developing Vision Zero plans and Safety reports have more information to work with when developing countermeasures.

4. APBP members will work with other professionals to refrain from contributing to conversations that add blame to victims based on housing status, race, age, and disability. These characteristics are often raised in crash reporting. Analyses of systems and conditions where crashes have been occurring should be well informed by the experiences of people in the community who use the spaces and systems being evaluated, including the voices of people of various incomes, races, ages, and disability status. For example, modal choice can be influenced by a lack of feeling safe 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 younger or older travelers can be attributed to a system designed only for certain people and not for people of all ages and abilities.

5. APBP members will advocate for and work with USDOT and other agencies on specific actions to remove victim-blaming language from safety/awareness campaigns. Whenever APBP members have an opportunity to influence the design and implementation of such campaigns, they will advocate for eliminating victim-blaming concepts and language from those campaigns. They will also call out such agencies that do use victim-blaming concepts and language.

Definitions:

- *Crash (not accident).* Collisions between road users and other occurrences of traffic violence should be referred to as *crashes* or *collisions*. The word *accident* implies unavoidability or lack of fault, and hampers our efforts to address the causes of traffic violence.
- *Traffic violence.* This is the harm people suffer due to an unforgiving system design and/or unaddressed motor vehicle driver behavior. 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.²
- *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.³
- *Distracted driving, walking, bicycling, etc.* Activities people engage in while traveling, regardless of mode, that diverts their attention from the task of safety and other people traveling around them.⁴

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

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

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

Examples Of Approaches to Avoid Victim Blaming:

- **Portland Police Bureau** crash reports use standard language noting the overall context of traffic violence, trends, and frequent contributing factors.
- **Colorado Department of Transportation** provides information on its website about best practices for language to use when reporting traffic crashes and fatalities.⁵
- **Charlotte, North Carolina**, includes neutral crash description reporting in the training of new police officers. The training is conducted by the city's Vision Zero program manager.
- **Columbus, Ohio, 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.*⁶

Resources

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⁵ <https://www.codot.gov/safety/traffic-safety-pulse/2024/february/press-release-best-practices-for-traffic-crash-reporting>

⁶ <https://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/04/04/associated-press-cautions-journalists-that-crashes-arent-always-accidents/>

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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 an initial draft policy statement from its Policy Committee members and Equity and Inclusion Committee members. APBP's Board of Directors approved the initial version of this policy statement on June 16, 2022, and this most recent revision on June 12, 2025. APBP members can suggest changes to any policy statement by contacting the association's executive director, Policy Committee co-chairs, or a board member. For more information, contact: Lauren Santangelo, Executive Director, at lsantangelo@amrms.com.