

Road to Zero

*Shifting Narratives
to Prevent Bicyclist and
Pedestrian Deaths*

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August 6, 2020

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Road to Zero Project Overview

Workshops for media, public information officers, and transportation leaders.

- Locations in Florida metro areas dangerous for pedestrians and bicyclists.
- Contextualize pedestrian and bicyclist deaths within a larger discussion about our shared responsibility for traffic safety.
- Focus on shifting narrative away from victim-blaming found in media reports.

Publication and National Coverage

Research Article

Framing the Bicyclist: A Qualitative Study of Media Discourse about Fatal Bicycle Crashes

Erin Scheffels¹, Julie Bond¹, and Lorraine E. Monteagut¹

Abstract

This research examines the linguistic choices that frame relationships between bicyclists and other parties involved in fatal crash events. Textual data were collected from media reports of all bicyclist traffic fatalities that occurred from January 2009 through June 2018 in Hillsborough County, Florida, which has a disproportionately high number of bicyclist deaths compared with other areas of the U.S. The media reports were coded with a qualitative data analysis software and analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA), a rigorous qualitative method used to analyze oral and written communication developed by Fairclough. Through CDA, the study examines how linguistic choices produce meaning and reinforce the "common sense" or "taken-for-granted" lexicon of transportation. Results show the majority of news reports were episodic rather than thematic, focusing on the traffic event and the parties involved in the crash, particularly the bicyclist. Vocabulary, grammatical structure, and narrative framing of news reports largely functioned to remove blame from the motorist and to highlight the bicyclist's actions. These linguistic strategies reflect the assumption that responsibility for safety rests on the bicyclist and detracts attention from potential social policy reform that would lead to fewer bicyclist fatalities. A minority of articles written with thematic frames focused on broader issues such as social capital, safety education, and advocacy. This interdisciplinary study is a unique contribution to transportation literature, employing a methodology typically reserved for communication scholars and linguists.

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Podcast / Transit / Bike/Ped / Smart Growth

Conclusive Evidence: How the Media Fails Bicyclists

By Angie Schmitt | Sep 28, 2018 | 12



Photo: Transportation for America

Media coverage of cycling deaths consistently suggests that the deaths are acceptable and the victims were at fault, a new study shows.

University of South Florida researchers Julie Bond and Erin Scheffels used a scientific technique called "critical discourse analysis" in their review of 189 news reports of 94 bicycling deaths in Hillsborough County, Florida, between 2009 and 2018 — and discovered substantial bias.

How We Talk About Drivers Hitting Cyclists

What the media gets wrong, and why, says a lot about how our society views vulnerable road users



Research Overview

Research Objective

To examine the linguistic choices that frame relationships between bicyclists and other parties involved in fatal crash events

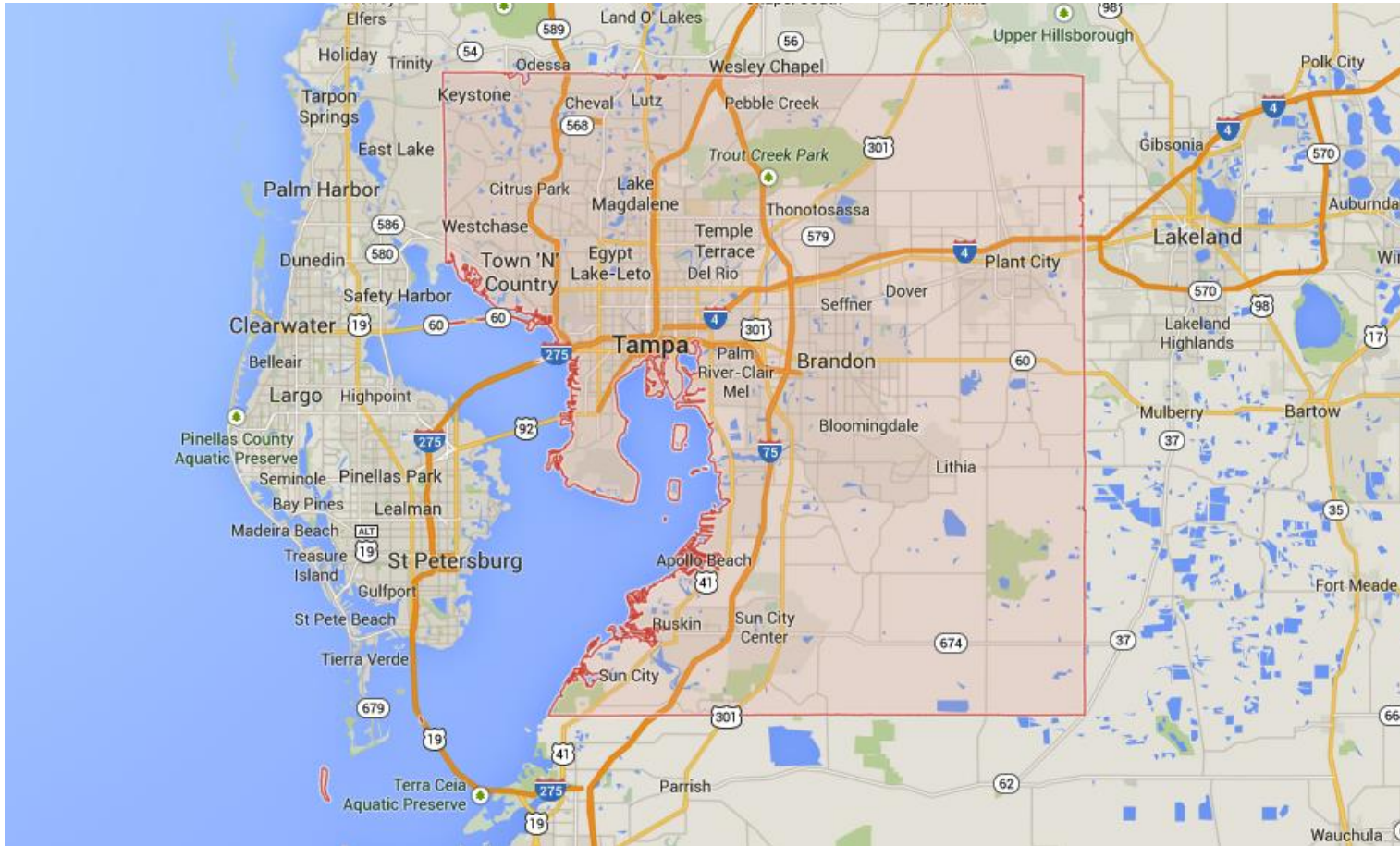
Data Collection

Textual data were collected from 189 media reports of the 94 bicyclist traffic fatalities that occurred from January 2009 – to June 2018 in Hillsborough County, Florida

Methods

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), qualitative method used to analyze oral and written communication

Site of Study – Hillsborough County, FL



Hillsborough County, Florida

2017 Population Estimates

1,408,566

Source: Vintage 2017 Population Estimates

Median Household Income

\$ 51,681

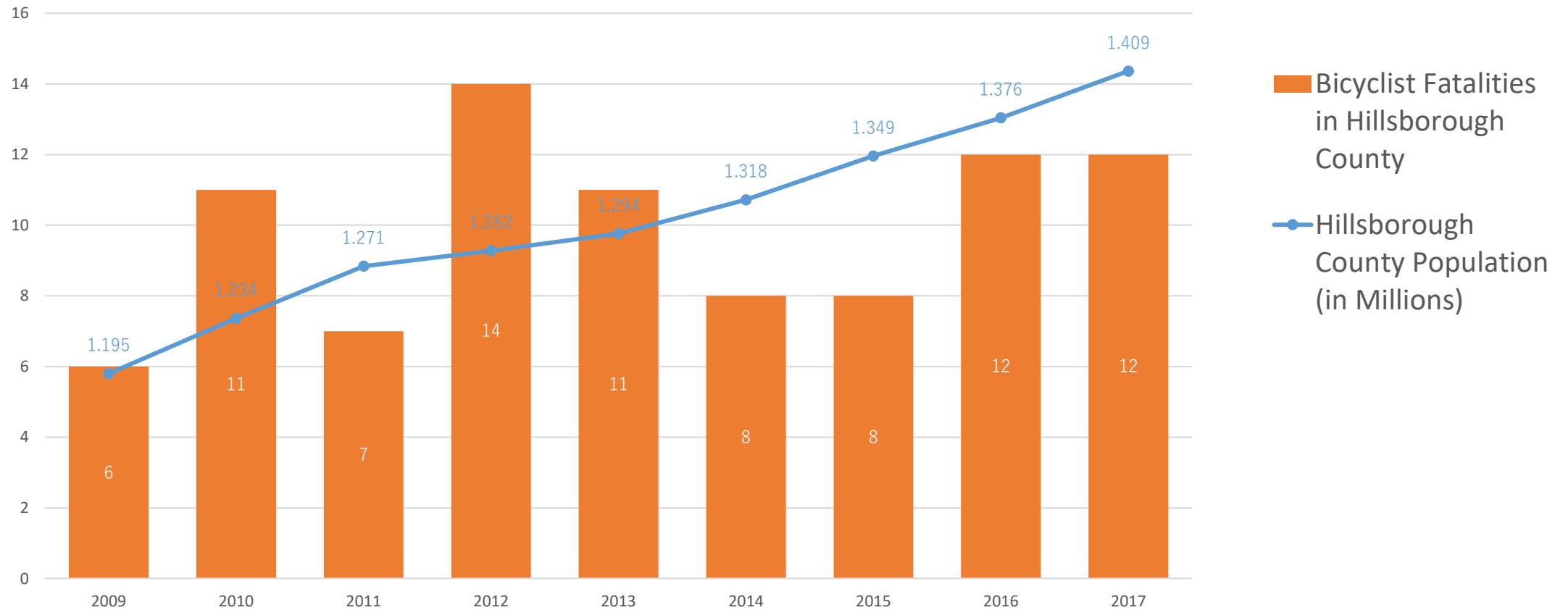
Source: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates

Persons in poverty, percent

15 %

Source: 2016 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)

Bicyclist Fatalities in Hillsborough County

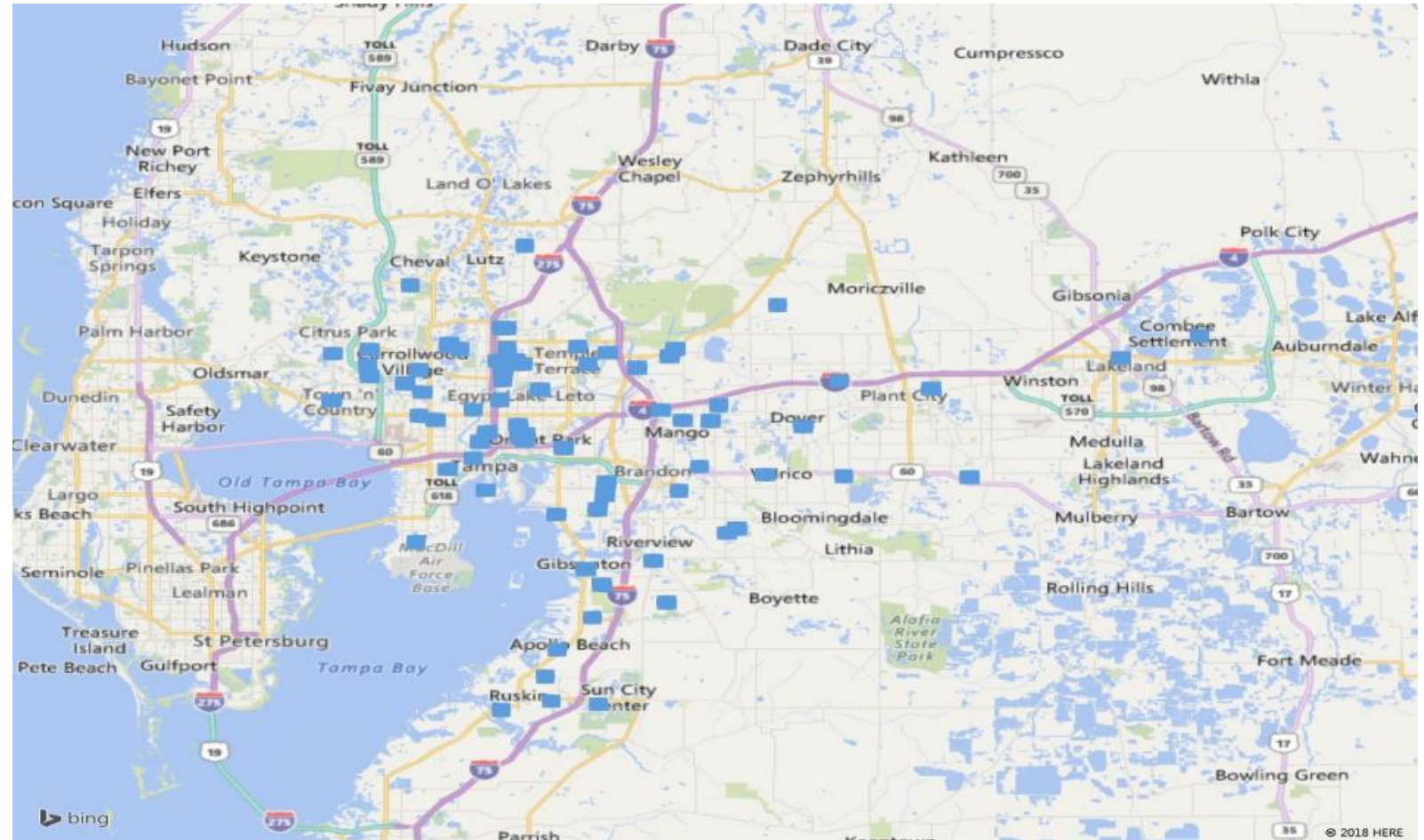


Bicycle Fatality Crash Location

Hillsborough
County, FL

January 2009
Through
June 2018

94 total fatalities

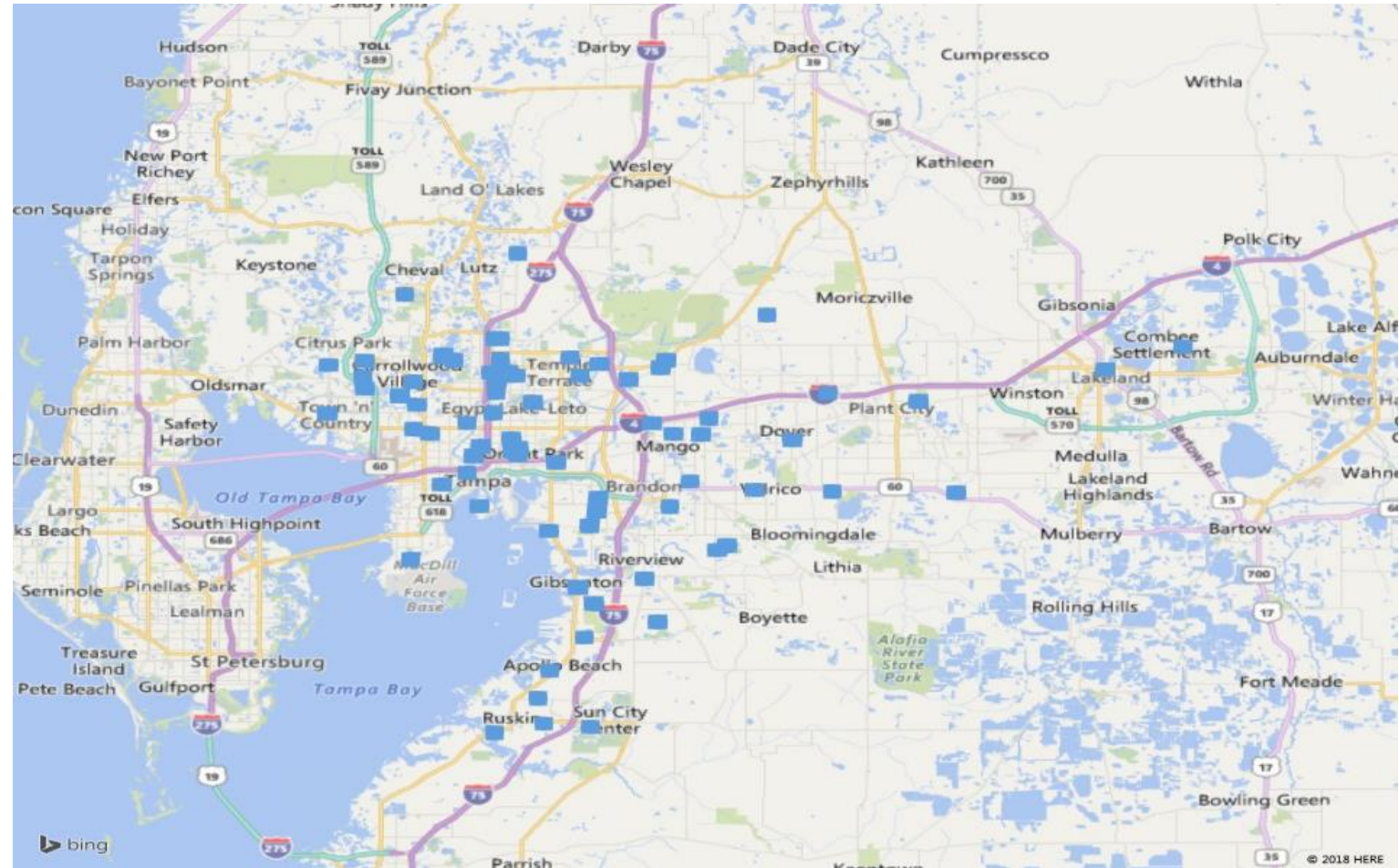


Location of Bicyclist Fatality Residence

Hillsborough
County, FL

January 2009
through
June 2018

94 total fatalities



Language in News Reports

PUBLIC SAFETY



Tampa bicyclist, 52, dies after being rear-ended by vehicle; no charges

Times staff

Published: December 15, 2017

Updated: December 15, 2017 at 07:17 PM

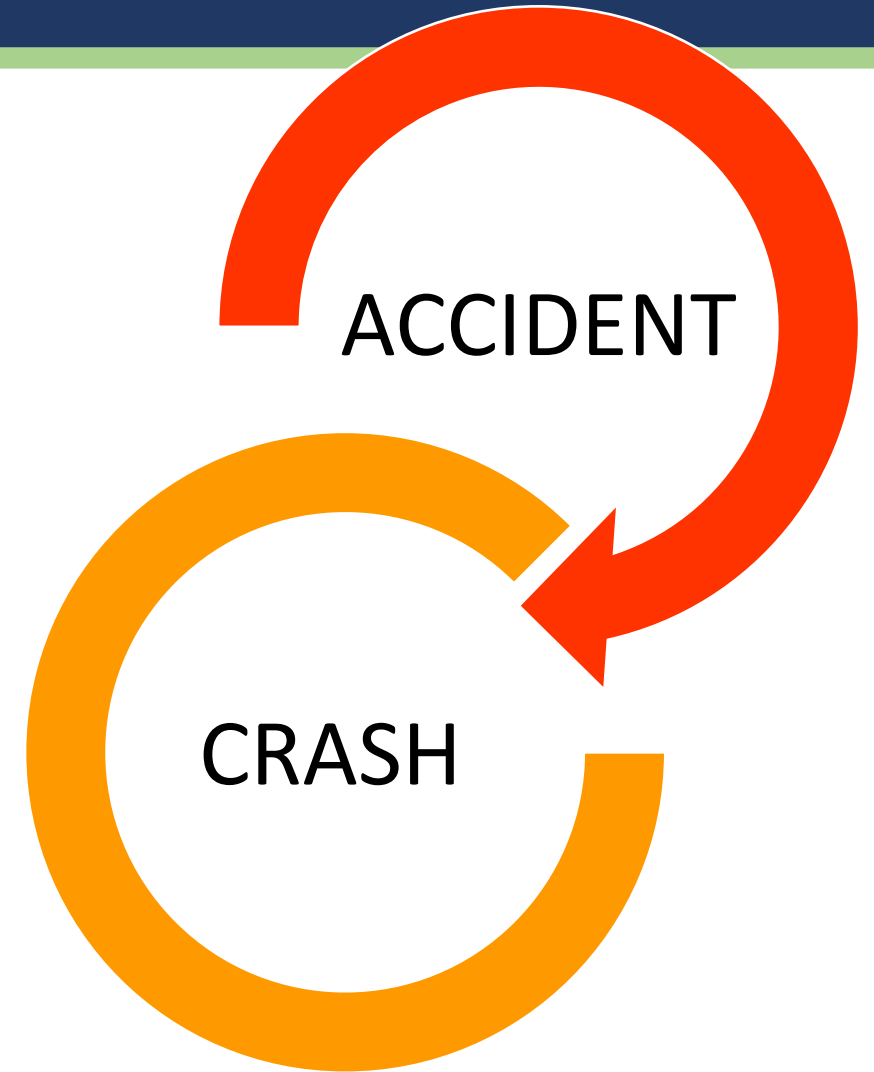
*Media language
influences public
understanding
of bicyclist
fatalities
(Hojman et al.,
2005).*

Language Matters

“Language, they believe, shapes policy. The word ‘accident,’ they say, presupposes a conclusion that no one bears responsibility” – Transportation Alternatives, 2015

... the words “crash” and “collision” ignore the laws of physics” (Magusin, 2017)

... the use of the word “accident” was no different from the use of the word “crash” and that microscopic language choices such as these do not impact reality (Badger, 2015)



Results

Taken-for-Granted Vocabulary

- **ACCIDENT:** the word “accident” was used to represent bicyclist fatalities 62 times in 48 articles.
- **INCIDENT:** the word “incident” was used 13 times in 12 articles.
- **CRASH:** the word “crash” was used 168 times in 91 articles.
- **COLLISION:** the word “collision” was used 26 times in 22 articles.



Road to Zero Workshop Objectives

- To bring media, planners, transportation leaders and advocates together to open a dialogue for conversations.
- To find creative solutions from different perspectives.
- To identify episodic and thematic frames in writing.
- Identify resources from transportation professionals available to the media.

Media Themes

- Passive sentence construction when describing driver behavior
- Active construction when describing bicyclist/pedestrian behavior
- Omission of agents (motorists)
- Vocabulary and fact choices
- Episodic frame is dominant

Individual Activity

Write a description of the crash from the details of the police report provided in your e-workbook. You have ten minutes for this activity.

Activity Instructions

- Write a title.
- Write a subtitle.
- Write at least five sentences.

Be prepared to discuss your experience.

19-023 Major Accident Investigation Team (M.A.I.T) Investigates Fatal Vehicle Vs Bicycle Crash In Belleair Bluffs

M.A.I.T. Crash Investigation

Who:

Pinellas County Sheriff's Office
Patrol Operations Bureau
- Major Accident Investigation Team (M.A.I.T.)

Anthony Violante (Bicyclist – Deceased)
DOB: 01/17/1963

Kendra Sharp (Driver- Uninjured)
DOB: 07/10/2001
Vehicle: 2016 Mercedes AMG G63

What:

Deputies assigned to the Major Accident Investigation Team are investigating a fatal vehicle vs bicycle crash in Belleair Bluffs.

When:

The crash occurred at about 8:42 p.m. on Sunday, February 17, 2019.

Where:

The crash occurred at West Bay Drive and Harbor View Lane.

Why/How:

Deputies assigned to the Major Accident Investigation Team are investigating a fatal vehicle vs bicycle crash in Belleair Bluffs.

Why/How:

Deputies assigned to the Major Accident Investigation Team are investigating a fatal vehicle vs bicycle crash in Belleair Bluffs.

According to investigators, 17-year-old Kendra Sharp was driving her 2016 Mercedes AMG G63 northbound on Harbor View Lane, approaching the stop sign at West Bay Drive.

Deputies say 56-year-old Anthony Violante was riding his bicycle eastbound on West Bay Drive, approaching Harbor View Lane, on the south sidewalk. Violante did not have front or rear lights on his bicycle.

After making a complete stop, Sharp proceeded to turn westbound onto West Bay Drive when Violante struck the front driver's corner of Sharp's vehicle, ejecting him from his bicycle. Violante was not wearing a helmet.

Violante was transported to Bayfront Hospital with life-threatening injuries and was later pronounced deceased.

Sharp did not sustain any injuries.

Impairment and speed do not appear to be a factor in the crash.

Next of kin has been notified.

The investigation continues.

<https://pcsoweb.com/19-023-major-accident-investigation-team-mait-investigates-fatal-vehicle-vs-bicycle-crash-in-belleair-bluffs>

Fact Choices

- A story can be factual and biased at the same time.
- Fact choices and organization affect perception.
- Details typically found in crash stories that should be balanced for neutrality:
 - Demographic and socioeconomic descriptors
 - Behaviors leading up to the crash
 - Outcomes for the motorists and victims

Sentence Construction

- Agency is communicated through grammar.
- Passive construction: The subject is absent or included after the verb.
- Passive sentences direct focus to the bicyclist/pedestrian instead of the motorist.
 - Passive: The bicyclist was struck by a motorist.
 - Active: The motorist struck a bicyclist.

Agency

- Agent: subject who is clearly performing the action
- Agency: conscious action by a clear actor
- Omissions and references to inanimate objects obscure responsibility.
 - Omitted agent: The pedestrian was hit.
 - Inanimate agent: The car struck the bicyclist.
 - Clear agent: The driver hit and killed a man crossing the street.

Framing

- Episodic framing used to present specific events and “facts”.
 - Depicts events as isolated
 - Invokes perceptions of individual responsibility
- Thematic framing used to contextualize events within larger social and political issues.
 - Suggests events are connected
 - Invokes societal responsibility
 - Invites discussion about policy and infrastructure measures

Incremental Steps: Working Towards Change

“Being in law enforcement teaches us to follow "jargon" to explain just about everything. As a Public Affairs Sergeant, jargon can only complicate our message. Writing or speaking in a way that doesn't play into someone's bias or conceptions about an incident, can help change the perception of our releases. This doesn't apply to just this topic. This has given me a new perspective on how we relay information to our community.”

Incremental Steps: Working Towards Change

“I liked that there were individuals from all industries from higher education, transportation, TV news media and print media, local businesses, etc.”

“Great turnout from the media! Happy to see local writers, reporters, or their boss present to pass on the messages.”

Thank you!

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