

GUIDE TO IMPROVING POLICE PRESS RELEASES ABOUT CAR CRASHES

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On a typical day, over 100 Americans lose their lives in car crashes. That is like a commercial airplane falling out of the sky every other day. Yet there is little widespread public outcry about this significant and largely preventable loss of our loved ones, colleagues, and neighbors. Our research shows that [news coverage of crashes](#) may be [partly to blame](#). However, our research shows that most journalists draw heavily from press releases when drafting articles. Thus, we are going upstream to you, the police. This handout offers **5 pieces of advice** to help you improve press releases for crashes involving a person walking or biking. We suggest two areas for focus: word choice and reporting “just the facts.” We also include a Press Release template that you can use to report crashes.

WORD CHOICE

While word choice may seem like a minor issue, research shows that the words we use to describe crashes profoundly influence how readers think about what happened and what we should do about it. We offer two pieces of advice:

- 1. Use “crash”, not “accident”.** The word “accident” makes it seem like crashes are inevitable and cannot be reduced. Several sources—from the Associated Press to the British Medical Journal as well as the San Francisco, New York City, Denver, and Boulder Police Departments—concur with this advice.
- 2. Describe the crash carefully.** The most common way for newspapers to describe a crash is to write “A pedestrian was hit” or “A pedestrian was hit by a car.” Instead, we recommend writing “A driver hit a pedestrian.” If necessary, you can clarify that the “driver hit a pedestrian with their car”.

This involves three subtle changes to your sentences:

- ✓ **Include an actor.** Without an actor, nobody is responsible. A crash just “happened”.
- ✓ **Refer to the driver.** Humans, not objects, have agency. Unless the car malfunctioned, the car was not responsible for the crash. Refer to the *driver* operating the vehicle.
- ✓ **Make the driver the focus of the sentence, not the pedestrian.** The focus of the sentence tends to receive more blame. Existing coverage overwhelmingly focuses on pedestrians (~75% of the time), even when it is unclear who was at fault. In the absence of clear evidence, we recommend shifting away from the default. Focusing on the driver will help even the playing field and better reflect the greater responsibility drivers should shoulder because of their greater potential for harm.

JUST THE FACTS

Police officers understandably want to report “just the facts” when writing press releases. In doing so, they hope to avoid legal issues and to prevent unnecessary bias. Nevertheless, even “just the facts” press releases can still lead to problems because some facts are easier for officers to identify than others. Officers are more likely to describe the characteristics and actions of individuals rather than the broader roadway network. This tendency is perfectly reasonable, since most people are naturally better at thinking about individuals than systems and are better at identifying direct causes rather than indirect causes.

Also, officers may underestimate the degree to which roadway conditions can contribute to crashes. For instance, crashes are **much** more likely on urban arterial streets (streets with high speeds, high volumes, and many driveways). These roadways are considered *crash hotspots*: even though they don’t make up much of the total roadway mileage, they are the scene of most traffic deaths. High speeds also make crashes more likely and more dangerous. A pedestrian has a 73% chance of being killed when hit at 40 mph. This falls to 40% at 30 mph and just 13% at 20 mph.

The natural tendency to focus on individuals plays out in press releases and news coverage, where materials are much more likely to describe the pedestrian (e.g., they were “outside of a crosswalk”, “in the roadway”, or “wearing dark clothing”) than the roadway (e.g., the speed limit, number of lanes, availability of sidewalks, or adjacent land uses like stores, bus stops, and housing developments). This pattern is a problem because it subtly instructs readers to focus on individual behaviors rather than the underlying systems that made a crash much more likely. In turn, this leads to individual-level advice like “Wear bright clothing” or “Don’t jaywalk”. While this advice may be appropriate for some contexts, it will not address systemic issues like high speeds or poor infrastructure, which could more dramatically reduce crashes. To correct the balance, we suggest three steps:

3. Carefully consider whether to include descriptions of people walking and biking.

- **Consider omitting information about clothing color.** Describing the victim's "dark clothing" subtly implies they were at fault and should not be included, especially if it is unclear the extent to which other factors like the roadway design and driver behavior contributed.
- **Carefully consider whether to include information about where the victim was located.** Was the pedestrian really outside a crosswalk? In most states, all intersections are considered crosswalks, even when there are no painted lines. Drivers are required to stop or yield.

4. Exclude quotes from drivers avoiding responsibility (“They darted out.” or “I didn’t see them.”).

- To avoid bias from driver’s self-report, seek input from other witnesses.
- Remember that drivers have a responsibility to adjust speed when visibility is low.
- Omit the common phrase “the driver is cooperating.” Cooperation is required by law and this phrase is not typically included for other types of incidents.

5. Describe the relevant characteristics of the crash location and roadway. We suggest including:

- Type of roadway + number of lanes (e.g., four-lane arterial, two-lane residential street)
- Posted speed limit
- Availability of unobstructed sidewalks (especially if the victim was “traveling in the roadway”)
- Visibility conditions (consider weather and lighting)

TEMPLATE FOR PRESS RELEASES

We invite police departments to use the following template to report on crashes involving a person walking or biking. Agencies are welcome to modify the template as they see fit, but we encourage them to incorporate the best practices identified above.

On (date) at (time), officers responded to (location) in response to a collision involving (parties). The preliminary investigation revealed:

A driver hit a person (walking / biking) with a (vehicle type, make, model). The driver was headed (direction) on (street name), a (number)-lane (highway / arterial road / local road) with a posted speed limit of (number) miles per hour, and the (pedestrian / cyclist) was (describe their actions). At the time of the crash, visibility was (describe visibility ex. “poor due to heavy rain”). [Include any additional relevant details about crash location, including land uses, sidewalk availability, etc.]

[if hit and run]: The driver fled the scene. Please contact (contact information) with relevant information.

[if fatal]: This is the (cumulative total) fatal collision of (year) in (city/jurisdiction). Last year, (total) people died on (state) streets, of which (total) were people walking.

By: (Rank) (Name) (Badge Number)