DELAWARE VALLEY

dvrpc

REGIONAL
PLANNING COMMISSION

→ **MEDIA TOOLKIT**

Reporting Traffic Crashes

IN THE GREATER PHILADELPHIA REGION

NEWS

This toolkit is intended to enlist media partners in improving the safety culture in the Greater Philadelphia region. The media plays a crucial role in shaping safety culture through their reporting on traffic crashes.
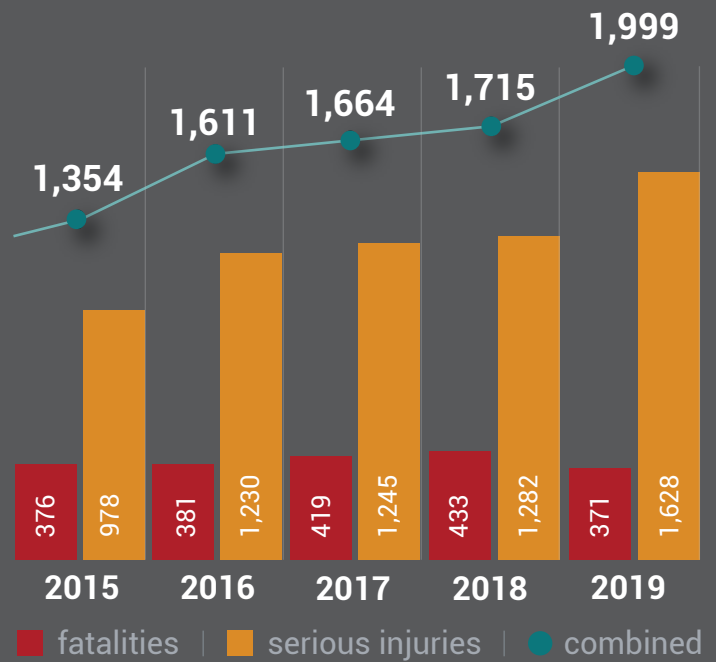
Journalists have the power, with effective storytelling, to influence collective action and behavior changes to create safer roadways and save lives.

You can help improve traffic safety culture with these tips:

- **Re-frame** the story within the context of a systemic public health crisis.
- Use **"crash,"** not "accident."
- Use **human-based reporting**.
- Place **equal scrutiny** on each actor.
- Scrutinize **counterfactual statements**.

8,343

Total killed & serious injury crashes in the DVRPC region* from 2015-2019.

Combined totals: 1,354 · 1,611 · 1,664 · 1,715 · 1,999

Year	fatalities	serious injuries
2015	376	978
2016	381	1,230
2017	419	1,245
2018	433	1,282
2019	371	1,628

■ fatalities ■ serious injuries ● combined

* DVRPC region: Philadelphia, Chester, Montgomery, Delaware, and Bucks counties in Pennsylvania; and Mercer, Gloucester, Camden, and Burlington counties in New Jersey.

When a person is hit by a driver:

20 mph — 1 in **10** will die.

30 mph — 5 in **10** will die.

40 mph — 9 in **10** will die.
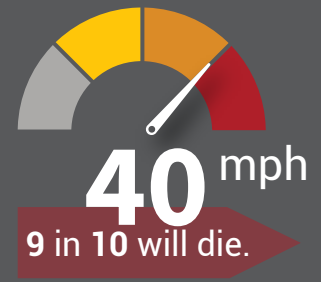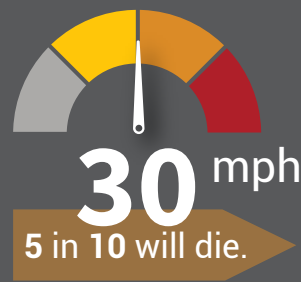
Speed is the most important factor in the potential damage and severity of injury in the event of a crash. A pedestrian is likely to survive a collision when the driver that hits them is traveling at 20 mph but at 40 mph, they are very unlikely to survive the collision. The Philadelphia region has seen an increasing trend in both serious injury and fatal crashes from 2015-2019. **These statistics suggest that there is a need for a stronger safety culture in the region.**

Framing crash incidents within the context of a persistent, systemic traffic safety crisis has been shown to create more public awareness for issues of traffic safety in the community.[1] **Journalists have the power, with effective storytelling, to influence collective action and individual behavior to create safer roadways and save lives.**

[1] Ralph, K., Iacobucci, E., Goddard, T., & Thigpen, C. (2019). "Editorial patterns in Bicyclist and Pedestrian Crash Reporting" Transportation Research Record. doi.org/10.1177/0361198119825637

→ **Re-frame** the story within the context of a systemic public health crisis.

Problem
Crash reporting is often told as a one-off event, using **episodic framing**.

Solution
Frame the crash as part of a larger, preventable, public health epidemic, using **thematic framing**.

Journalists should frame the crash within the greater context of these events. This could include the number of crashes and resulting injuries and fatalities, on a local and national level. Does the street have a history of collisions? Are there countermeasures that can help reduce the severity of crashes? Local planning officials are a good resource for crash data and statements that offer thematic framing on safety trends in the region.

Original Statement: "Two drivers collided their cars at the intersection of Broad and Oxford streets around 3 a.m. Saturday."
Revised Statement: "Two drivers collided their cars at the intersection of Broad and Oxford streets around 3 a.m. Saturday. Broad Street is a high-crash corridor, with one of the highest rates of fatal crashes in the city."

→ Use "**crash**," not "accident."

Problem
"**Accident**" is used to describe a traffic crash.

Solution
Use "**crash**" to retain neutrality about the event.

"Crash" is a neutral word choice. "Accident" implies that there was inevitability and faultlessness in the incident (consider that we rarely refer to plane "accidents"). The AP Stylebook recommends this word choice. "Collision" could be used as a substitute for "crash."

Original Statement: "I-85 shut down following major accident involving fire engines and tractor trailers."
Revised Statement: "I-85 shut down following major crash involving fire engines and tractor trailers."

→ Use **human-based** reporting.

Problem
Object-based reporting describes the vehicle as the actor in the crash instead of identifying the driver.

Solution
Use **human-based reporting** when reporting on crashes. Journalists should report that a driver, not a car, hit a pedestrian.

In a study of traffic crash reporting, journalists were four times more likely to grant agency to vehicles than to drivers. This absolves motorists from blame. All actors in a crash should be described the same way, otherwise some actors could be given less accountability.

Original Statement: "'An SUV struck and killed a pedestrian, then crashed into a home Wednesday morning,' police said."
Revised Statement: "'The driver of an SUV struck and killed a pedestrian, then crashed into a home Wednesday morning,' police said."

→ Place **equal scrutiny** on each actor.

Problem
Unequal scrutiny is applied to pedestrians and bicyclists for their actions in a crash versus motorists in news stories.

Solution
Equal scrutiny and attention should be given to each actor's actions in a crash.

When more emphasis is put on one party over the other, it inadvertently shifts blame onto that party. Determining the cause of a crash is complex, and should not be inferred from the initial police report and witness testimony. It's also important to remember that relative to other modes of personal transportation, cars are much heavier objects with much higher potential speeds. Cars can create significantly more deadly force in a collision relative to a bicyclist, motorcyclist, or pedestrian.

Original Statement: "The cyclist attempted to make a left turn north onto 65th Street and crossed into the path of the Escape."
Revised Statement: "The cyclist attempted to make a left turn north onto 65th Street, when a person driving an Escape struck them."

→ Scrutinize **counterfactual statements**.

Problem
Counterfactual statements in news stories about crashes can inadvertently shift blame.

Solution
Be aware of **counterfactual statements**. Consider whether they are relevant to the story and if they shift blame.

Counterfactuals are statements that infer what might have happened under different circumstances. These statements can shift blame by identifying apparently relevant information that may have had no bearing on the result of the crash. For instance, while wearing a helmet can reduce the severity of many crashes involving bicyclists, that is not the case in all bicyclist crashes. Noting that they were not wearing one can subtly shift blame onto a bicyclist victim. Information from witnesses or police should be omitted if it inadvertently shifts blame, especially where the allegedly contributing factor is not a violation of the rules of the road.

Original Statement: "The truck, owned by Approved Oil, was making a left turn onto East 37th Street at the same time Foster attempted to cross while wearing headphones and a hood, according to police sources and witnesses."
Revised Statement: "The truck, owned by Approved Oil, was making a left turn onto East 37th Street at the same time Foster attempted to cross, according to police sources and witnesses."

Resources for **crash data** in the Greater Philadelphia region.

DVRPC Safety Data: www.dvrpc.org/Transportation/Safety
DVRPC provides tools to analyze crash data, including crash data downloads available to the municipal level for the nine-county region. Philadelphia County can be broken down into its 18 planning districts.

Local Trauma Centers
Local trauma centers are useful resources for more localized research, but may not have data readily available.

Organization contacts for further information:

Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission:
Elise Turner, Associate Manager, Office of Communications and Engagement, eturner@dvrpc.org

City of Philadelphia: press@phila.gov

New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT):
Communications Office, 609.963.1975

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT):
Press Office, 610.205.6800

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