

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Professor Adrian Davis
Date: 3rd October 2022
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No.60 Traffic violence as part of 'normal' life

Top Line: Both effects of crashes and their causes need to be seen in a much more systemic way as part of daily occurrence of traffic violence on the roads.

Beliefs and attitudes prevalent in the western world contribute to the problem of vehicular violence. Television, movies, and video games would lead us to the conclusion that violence is part of normal life, with everyday events easily escalating to the point of physical and/or psychological aggression. This reflects a belief system that is grounded in the view that our world is a hostile and competitive environment, dominated by challenge and retaliation. Over time, people in the western nations have become increasingly intolerant of frustration and less accepting of rules. This can be seen in increasing defiance and rebellious behaviour, more frequent manipulation of social interactions, and higher levels of selfishness and impatience.¹ Traffic crashes are one presentation of violence that levies a significant and detrimental toll on societies.

A study analysed coverage of traffic crashes in Dutch local newspapers. Traffic crashes are a daily occurrence with severe societal impacts; for those directly involved it is likely to be the most violent episode of their lives. This constitutes an unconscious sacrifice that society is apparently willing to pay. This Dutch study used traffic crash coverage in local Dutch newspaper to explore the specifics of the underlying order. To structure this exploration, it links the coverage to larger competing concepts of justice and efficiency.² The first main finding was that crashes are for the most part reported with a factual description of an isolated incident, without discussing larger patterns or underlying mechanisms that create the unsafe conditions. In the headlines of 70 articles on crashes between motor vehicles and vulnerable road users, the coverage was usually refers more frequently to a car driver. The majority of headlines and body texts refer to a secondary party as a vehicle instead of as a person e.g. hit a vehicle.

Secondly, people suffer physical and mental injuries regardless of the role they play in the crash, and blame distribution becomes much more complex despite 'victim-blaming' dominance in news reports. As the researcher noted: the tension between seeing crashes as human tragedies versus glitches in the machine mirrors the societal discussion in the 1970s between the campaign to "Stop de Kindermoord" (Stop Child Murder) when motor traffic growth led to a steep increase in child road deaths, and Veilig Verkeer Nederland (VVN - Safe Traffic Netherlands). While the former claimed that the magnitude of traffic violence, especially against children, demanded a complete revision of the car dominated traffic the system, the latter focused on educating children and parents on traffic safety behaviour. Now, 50 years later, the VVN approach still prevails in current mainstream framing of traffic safety – even in The Netherlands.

¹ Carroll, L., Rothe, P. 2014 Viewing vehicular violence through a wide angle lens: Contributing Factors and a Proposed Framework, *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 56(2,) pp. 149-166.

² Brömmelstroet, M. 2020 Framing systemic traffic violence: Media coverage of Dutch traffic crashes, *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 5, 100109