



Reporting on Traffic Crashes in the Greater Rochester Region

————— *Media Toolkit* —————

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Our Mission

Whether by bus, by rail, on bike, or on foot, Reconnect Rochester champions transportation choices that enable a more vibrant and equitable community.

Our Vision

We envision a community connected by a robust transportation network that makes it easy for everyone—regardless of physical or economic ability—to get around.

Why We Do This Work



Environment: According to the Monroe County Climate Action Plan, 36% of our region's greenhouse gas emissions come from the cars we drive. Supporting the growth of sustainable transportation is crucial to reducing the overall effects of climate change on our community.



Community Health: Studies show that just 30 minutes of physical activity daily significantly boosts overall health and reduces the risks of life-altering diseases (Institute for Transportation and Development Policy). Promoting active lifestyles through walking and biking is an easy and accessible path to a healthier Rochester.



Safety: It's getting more dangerous to walk and bike in Monroe County, with an average of 12 people dying on our streets every year. Street design, vision zero policies and targeted driver behavior are just a few key ways to protect the lives of vulnerable road users on our streets.



Social Equity: 24% of households in the City of Rochester do not have access to a personal vehicle (City of Rochester Active Transportation Plan). A robust transportation network would improve access to resources and reduce transportation as barrier for Monroe County residents living in poverty.



Economy: According to AAA, the cost of owning and maintaining a car in 2023 was \$12,182. Eliminating the burden of car ownership through investing in alternative transportation options could significantly benefit the personal financial health of individuals in Monroe County.

The purpose of this toolkit is to provide journalists in the local media landscape the knowledge and tools needed to shift the perception of traffic collisions in the public eye. We believe that the media can have a powerful impact on our culture by changing the way crashes are reported, and bring us closer to building safer roadways for all users.

Despite traffic crashes being one of the **leading causes of preventable death in the United States**, as well as the national trend of increasing pedestrian fatalities, there is very little attention paid to this silent epidemic of traffic fatalities. Especially for those who are considered vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists. Research has demonstrated that editorial patterns in traffic crash reporting influence reader's perception of incidents and what can be done about it.¹

Man, 60, struck and killed by car
while crossing Driving Park Avenue

TOP STORIES

**Pedestrian fatally struck in
Gates**

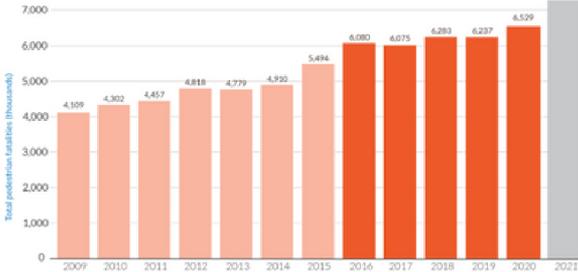
NEWS

**12-year-old boy struck by car,
seriously injured in Rochester**

1. Tara Goddard, Kelcie Ralph, Calvin G. Thigpen, Evan Iacobucci, *Does news coverage of traffic crashes affect perceived blame and preferred solutions? Evidence from an experiment*, *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Volume 3, 2019, 100073, ISSN 2590-1982, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trip.2019.100073>.
(<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590198219300727>)

The Silent Epidemic

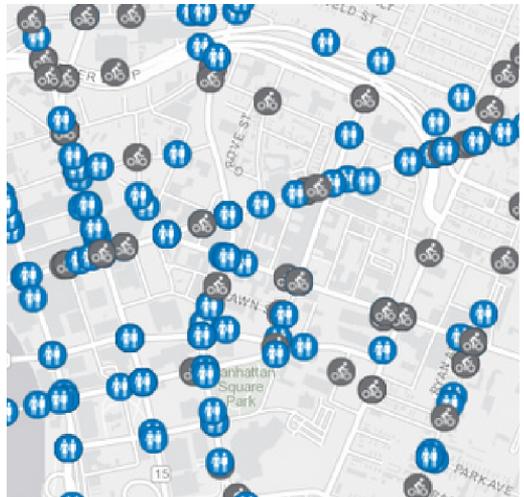
U.S. pedestrian fatalities
(2009-2020)



According to Smart Growth America's **Dangerous by Design 2022 report**, pedestrian fatalities are up **62%** since they began steadily rising in 2009.²

According to **Governors Highway Safety Association**, 2022 saw at least 7,508 pedestrians killed by drivers - the highest number since 1981.³

Reconnect Rochester's Monroe County Crash Map, updated annually, the crash map visualizes all reported pedestrian and cyclist crashes that occur in Monroe County over a ten year period. According to the data provided by Genesee Transportation Council, between 2013-2022 there were 5,262 crashes involved bicyclists and pedestrians, 2,094 of which resulted in injury or fatality.⁴



2. Smart Growth America. (2022 July). *Dangerous By Design 2022*.

<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

3. Governors Highway Safety Administration. (2023 June). *Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State 2022 Preliminary DATA (January-December)*. <https://www.ghsa.org/resources/Pedestrians23>

4. Reconnect Rochester. (2023, September 19). *Monroe County Crash Map*.

<https://reconnectrochester.org/monroe-county-traffic-crash-map-2/>

Common Misconceptions



“Cyclists should not be in the roadway.”

New York State made bicycles **street legal vehicles** in 1887, well before the mass adoption of the personal motor vehicle. In Rochester, bikes were banned from using the sidewalk up until 1958 when said ban was repealed. Today, bikes are allowed both in the street and on the sidewalk with the exception of the Central Traffic District in the downtown core where cyclists above the age of 12 are not permitted to ride on the sidewalks.



“Helmets are required for all cyclists.”

In New York State, helmets are only required to be worn by people under the age of **14**. They are optional for anyone 14+ riding a bike. It should also be noted that helmets do not prevent cyclists from being hit by drivers, they are precautions that some cyclists choose to take because of the dangers posed on our roadways by motor vehicle traffic.



“Jaywalking is illegal.”

According to NYS Vehicle and Traffic Law Section 1152, every pedestrian crossing a roadway at any point other than a marked crosswalk shall **yield** to vehicles in the right of way, but they are not banned from crossing at any point.

Although these common misconceptions may not be explicitly stated in any given article, we hope that they provide some general clarification on the responsibilities of being a non-motor vehicle road user.

Ways to Improve Crash Reporting

Framing

Re-framing the story: instead of using episodic framing and looking at each incident as an isolated event, use thematic framing by including relevant facts. Some examples include:

- Road Design elements, such as crosswalks, speed limit, bike lanes, road signage, etc.
- Statistics and trends, such as local crashes or state/nation-wide trends
- Quotes from local residents, traffic safety experts, or elected officials
- Safety initiatives undertaken by the municipality such as Vision Zero commitments

“Crash” vs. “Accident”

The use of the word “accident” implies an inevitability and faultlessness in the incident. Instead, neutral language such as “crash” or “collision” should be used. The AP Stylebook also recommends this language choice. Here’s an example:

 “Man in critical condition after **accident** on East Avenue.”

 “Man in critical condition after **crash** on East Avenue.”

Avoid counterfactual statements

Examples of counterfactual statements include “the cyclists was not wearing a helmet” or “alcohol and/or drugs were not a factor”. These statements imply that the outcome would have changed if these factors were different. They also can obscure the systemic nature of crashes, absolve actors of their behavior, and shift the reader’s perception of blame onto the victim. It is best to avoid including them anywhere in the article.

Human-based vs object-based references

Often times reports will refer to drivers as “vehicles” and pedestrians/cyclists in more human terms such as pedestrian, man/woman, child. Instead, all actors in a crash should be referred to in the same way.

 “Man struck by a **car** on Lake Avenue.”

 “Man struck by a **driver** on Lake Avenue.”

Focus

Research has shown that readers assign more blame on the focus of the sentence. One study found that 73% of sentences in their sample of articles focused on the vulnerable road user compared to the acting agent.⁵

 “A pedestrian was struck by a vehicle.”

 “A vehicle struck a pedestrian.”

Agency

Since readers identify agents as having responsibility, avoid using non-agentive sentences that obscure the role of drivers as agents in the incident.

 “A pedestrian was struck in Gates on Sunday night.”

 “A pedestrian was struck **by an SUV driver** in Gates on Sunday night.”

5. Ralph, K., Iacobucci, E., Thigpen, C. G., & Goddard, T. (2019). Editorial Patterns in Bicyclist and Pedestrian Crash Reporting. *Transportation Research Record*, 2673(2), 663-671. [Smart Growth America. \(2022 July\). Dangerous By Design 2022.](https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/)
<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>

Sources for Crash Data and Statistics

Reconnect Rochester - Monroe County Crash Map



Scan the QR code or visit

ReconnectRochester.org/monroe-county-traffic-crash-map-2 to access the crash map.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/>

Bureau of Transportation Statistics

<https://www.bts.gov/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/>

Institute for Traffic Safety Management & Research

<https://www.itsmr.org/>

Monroe County Climate Action Plan

<https://www.monroecountyclimateaction.com/>

City of Rochester Active Transportation Plan

<https://www.cityofrochester.gov/atmp/>

Institute for Transportation and Development Policy

<https://www.itdp.org/>

More Helpful Resources

Vision Zero Reporting

<https://visionzeroreporting.com/>

Smart Growth America

<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/dangerous-by-design/>