DYING WHILE WALKING
INTERROGATING MEDIA COVERAGE OF PEDESTRIAN DEATHS IN THE UNITED STATES

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BACKGROUND

- Increased risk of *Dying While Walking*
  - From 2012 to 2016, in the United States, the risk of dying as a pedestrian due to a traffic crash has outpaced the risk of dying as a driver or a passenger.

- Defining “Pedestrian”
  - Despite the fact that multiple public agencies keep records on pedestrian deaths, there is no consistent definition of what constitutes a “pedestrian” when a traffic crash has occurred.

- Situating the “Victim”
  - Pedestrian safety campaigns have drawn criticism as being guilty of “pedestrian-blaming” and some groups have argued that coverage of pedestrian deaths is a form of “victim shaming.”

- Given the importance of media coverage for shaping public opinion and informing solutions to public policy problems, this research was guided by one single research question: **How does the media portray pedestrian deaths in the United States?**
Pedestrian fatalities, as a percentage of total traffic-related fatalities, has risen from 14.26% to 15.98%

- 2012 - 4,818 pedestrian fatalities out of 33,782 total traffic-related fatalities (14.26%)
- 2016 - 5,987 pedestrian fatalities out of 37,461 total traffic-related fatalities (15.98%)
- Average of 13.2 pedestrian fatalities per day to 16.4 per day

24.3% increase in pedestrian fatalities from 2012 to 2016

- 8.7% increase in non-pedestrian fatalities

Cause?

- Increased urban population, outdated roadway designs, and pedestrian behavior, but that’s not what we’re investigating.
The definition of “pedestrian” and the role of the pedestrian have changed over time. The definition of “pedestrian” has a high degree of variation (Methorst et al., 2017; Noland et al., 2017), which results in variegated assessments of pedestrian fatalities by public agencies (NHTSA, USDOT, coroner’s/medical examiner’s offices), public safety organizations, and news media organizations.

In the 1920’s, the current definition of “traffic crash” emerged (Norman, 1962).

- Historian Peter D. Norton (2007) argues that as motor vehicle usage rose, and the physical reconstruction of roadways lagged, it was necessary to socially reconstruct the roadway – determining who belonged and didn’t belong in the roadway.
- Motor Vehicle-Centric Conceptualization of the road, results in the erosion of the road as a shared space.
  - Becomes institutionalized and normalized over time.

Situating the “Victim” and Assigning Blame

- Historically, ridicule was seen as an effective socializing force to control pedestrian behavior (Norton, 2007).
  - Sordid history of “jaywalking”
- More recently, “distracted while walking” or “petexting.”
- Is this occurring? If so, what might be the public policy impact?
DATA COLLECTION & METHODS

- Randomly selected five cities and one county in the United States. Only qualification was that they were in the Top 100 populated cities/counties, and we wanted a degree of geographic distribution.
  1. Baton Rouge, Louisiana
  2. Fort Wayne, Indiana
  3. Milwaukee, Wisconsin
  4. Orlando, Florida
  5. Tucson, Arizona
  6. St. Louis County, Missouri

- Contacted coroner’s and medical examiner’s offices, and requested the names of individuals whose death was classified as a “pedestrian death” from January 1, 2012 to December 31, 2016.
  - Revealed variations in how “pedestrian deaths” are categorized, which necessitated much cleaning and re-coding.
## DATA COLLECTION & METHODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Pedestrian Deaths (2012-2016)</th>
<th>Pedestrian Death News Stories</th>
<th>News Story Location Rate</th>
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<tr>
<td>Baton Rouge, LA</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ft. Wayne, IN</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
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<td>Milwaukee, WI</td>
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<td>Orlando, FL</td>
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<td>49.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tucson, AZ</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Louis County, MO</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>60.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>490</strong></td>
<td><strong>269</strong></td>
<td><strong>54.9%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Why does media coverage matter?

- The media, specifically the news media, directly shape cultural logics, social institutions, and public discourse surrounding social meanings.
  - These social meanings impact what is perceived as appropriate and legitimate public policy regarding social issues.

Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)

- Key Strengths:
  - Emphasis on discovery and description
  - Beneficial when there is an absence or shortage of pre-existing research
- Key Procedure:
  - A focus on interpretation of meaning within content and culture
Pedestrian hit and killed on Greenwell Springs Rd.

By Amber Stegall, Digital Content Manager

BATON ROUGE, LA (WAFB) - An investigation continues into a fatal crash that killed a pedestrian on Greenwell Springs Road just before 10 p.m. Sunday.

According to Baton Rouge Police, Reginald Davis, 24, was wearing dark clothing while walking in the 9800 block of Greenwell Springs Road. The driver of the vehicle was traveling in the west bound lane when he struck Davis.

Investigators believe Davis was picking something up from the roadway when he was struck by the vehicle. Davis was pronounced dead at the scene.

The driver was not injured and was wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash. Police say alcohol does not appear to be a factor for the driver. It is unknown if alcohol or drugs are factors for the pedestrian.

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Pedestrian dies after being struck by car on Tiger Bend Rd.

By Amber Stegall, Digital Content Producer

BATON ROUGE, LA (WAFB) - The Baton Rouge Sheriff’s Office says a woman has died from injuries she sustained when she was hit by a vehicle Friday evening. The accident happened in the 16300 block of Tiger Bend Road just before 8:30 p.m.

According to the East Baton Rouge Sheriff’s Office, the pedestrian, Pamela Walton, 57, was standing a few feet away from the roadway and was struck by a passing vehicle. She was taken to a local hospital in critical condition and died early Saturday morning as a result of her injuries.

According to the EBR Sheriff’s Office, Walton was hit by the vehicle of a pizza delivery driver. Investigators say that he was looking down at his GPS when the incident happened.

Investigators report the driver heard a thud and thought he hit a mailbox at first, but he stopped once he realized what happened.

Deputies are continuing to investigate the incident. The driver was cooperative, and blood was taken for toxicology tests. Charges may still be filed.

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Pedestrian hit by vehicle, killed on Florida Boulevard Saturday morning

ADVOCATE STAFF REPORT  NOV 16, 2015 - 5:31 PM  (0)

A 25-year-old pedestrian died Saturday morning after being hit by a vehicle, officials said.

Ivory P. Robinson, 123 Live Oak Blvd., was struck by a vehicle while attempting to cross the street in the 8200 block of Florida Boulevard at around 7:20 a.m. Saturday, Baton Rouge Police spokesman Cpl. L'Jean McKneely said.

According to the EBR Sh
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Deputies are continuing
taken for toxicology test
Robinson died at the scene.

No information about the vehicle or the driver was provided.

The crash is still under investigation, McKneely said, though no citations had been issued or arrests made as of Sunday.
Pedestrian hit by vehicle Saturday morning

By Amber Stegall, Digital Content Producer

A 25-year-old pedestrian died Saturday morning when they were struck by a vehicle.

Ivy P. Robinson, 123 Live Oak Blvd., was struck in the 8200 block of Florida Boulevard around 7:20 a.m., according to the Baton Rouge Police Department. The driver was not injured and did not appear to be a factor in the incident.

The investigating deputies report the accident was a case of " Contributing to the Traffic Safety Program. "

The crash is still under investigation, and no information about the vehicle or the driver is available at this time.

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OFFICER'S NARRATIVE: Describe any unusual circumstances associated with crash including officer's observations and opinions. Include names, addresses, phone numbers, etc. If necessary, indicate damage to public or private property with owner's name & address. At the end of the narrative, refer to each by vehicle number.
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According to Baton Rouge Police, Reginald Davis, 24, was wearing dark clothing while walking in the 9800 block of Greenwell Springs Road. The driver of the vehicle was traveling in the westbound lane when he struck Davis.

Investigators believe Davis was picking something up from the roadway when he was struck by the vehicle. Davis was pronounced dead at the scene.

The driver was not injured and was wearing a seatbelt at the time of the crash. Police say alcohol does not appear to be a factor for the driver. It is unknown if alcohol or drugs are factors for the pedestrian.

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Pedestrian hit and killed on Greenwell Springs Rd.

By Amber Stegall, Digital Content Manager

Baton Rouge, LA (WAFB) - An investigation continues into a crash that killed one person near Greenwell Springs Road.

According to Baton Rouge Police, the 72-year-old pedestrian was struck while walking in the 9800 block of Greenwell Springs Road.

Investigators believe Davis was picking something up from the roadway when he was struck by the vehicle. Police say alcohol does not appear to be a factor for the driver. It is unknown if alcohol or drugs are factors for the pedestrian.

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EXISTING REGULATION-REPORTING RELATIONSHIP

NHTSA’s Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) → Municipal Police Reports → Public Perceptions

(Methorst et al., 2017; Noland et al., 2017)

(Noland et al., 2017; Shinar et al., 1983; Stutts et al., 1996)

Assumed, but understudied
EXPANDED REGULATION-REPORTING RELATIONSHIP

NHTSA’s Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS)

State’s Uniform Vehicle Accident Reporting Standards

Municipal Police Reports

Local Media Coverage

Public Perceptions

(Methorst et al., 2017; Noland et al, 2017)

(Methorst et al., 2017; Shinar et al, 1983; Stutts et al, 1996)

Assumed, but understudied
REGULATION-REPORTING RELATIONSHIP

- Exceptions?
  - Hit-and-run pedestrian fatalities
  - Unique victims

- Coverage of Exceptional Cases
  - Initial story’s content and structure
  - Follow-up stories (largely absent for other types of pedestrian fatalities)
  - More victim-focused
Police name suspect in deadly hit and run

By Cheryl Mercedes, Anchor

BATON ROUGE, LA (WAFB) - Police have named a suspect in a deadly pedestrian crash that happened June 1, 2013 on Greenwell Springs Road. Detectives believe Devante Pugh, 21, of Baker, LA ran a woman down and left her to die.

Nearby business owners have released surveillance video in an attempt to help police nab their suspect. A witness, who only wished to be identified as "Cindy" said she was sitting on her front porch on Greenwell Springs Road when she saw the unthinkable.

"In my mind I said, oh Lord that car is going mighty fast and all of a sudden I heard a collision," Cindy said.

Baton Rouge Police said Louise Hunter, 47 was killed after she was hit by a car. They believe the driver of a white Dodge Challenger hit Hunter and left the scene.

Surveillance video from a nearby business shows a woman witnesses say is Hunter, walking along the road. Another camera captured the woman before she crossed the street. Moments later, another camera picked up a white car coming to a sudden stop just past the Shell Diner Motel. A dark colored car also slowed down. It turned around on the street. The white car also doubled back, but kept its distance. It is clear the front passenger side of the car is damaged.

"I ran out to see what happened and I see a white car down the street and I see a body lying," Cindy said.

Cindy said the people in the dark car stopped and even had a conversation with the driver of the white car. "I heard him say, I didn't see it or I didn't see her."

Then suddenly, Cindy said, the man in the white car left. "He never came over to see if the lady was breathing or anything. Whatever they told him he scattered."

Cindy said she and a group of others stayed with the woman until help arrived. Given the number of witnesses and the surveillance video, she is surprised no one has been arrested.

"The things that were told to them, things that were pointed out to them, I am shocked. Because I thought by now they would have apprehended that person."

Detectives said Pugh will be charged with felony hit and run, and obstruction of justice. If you know where he is you are asked to call Crime Stoppers at 344-7867.

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Police name suspect in deadly hit and run

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Nearly business owners have released surveillance video in an attempt to help police nab their suspect. A witness, who only wished to be identified as "Cindy" said she was sitting on her front porch on Greenwell Springs Road when she saw the unthinkable.

"In my mind I said, oh Lord that car is going mighty fast and all of a sudden I heard a collision," Cindy said.

Baton Rouge Police said Louise Hunter, 67, was killed after she was hit by a car. They believe the driver of a white Dodge Challenger hit Hunter and left the scene.

Surveillance video from a nearby business shows a woman, witnesses say is Hunter, walking along the road. Another camera captured the woman before she crossed the street. Moments later, another camera picked up a white car coming to a sudden stop just past the Shell Draf Mecol. A dark colored car also slowed down. It turned around on the street. The white car also doubled back, but kept its distance. It is clear the front passenger side of the car is damaged.

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Media Coverage of Pedestrian Fatalities is:

1. **Driver/Motor Vehicle-Centric**
   - State Uniform Crash Reporting Standards are Motorist/Motor Vehicle-Centric
     - Historic institutionalization, normalization, and prioritization of the motor vehicle user over other users of the roadway
       - *Motor Vehicle-Centric Conceptualization of the Road*
     - Relationship with NHTSA’s Fatality Accident Reporting System (FARS)
     - Advances the work of Noland et al. (2017), who found, based on national-level data analysis, that the NHTSA’s definition of “pedestrian” has a distorting effect on data due to being focused on the location of the motor vehicle and the acts of the motor vehicle operator.

2. **Absence of Contextual Detail**
   - Formulaic News Media Coverage
     - Exceptions: (1) Hit-and-run cases, and (2) unique victim
     - Easily perceived as “pedestrian-blaming” or victim shaming, and perhaps is on a tacit level. However, as is the case with traffic crash data in general, details about non-motorist and non-vehicle issues are secondary and thus prone to lower quality coverage.
     - Omission or Commission?
IMPLICATIONS + RECOMMENDATIONS

- News media need to be less formulaic in their approach to covering pedestrian deaths.
  - Take steps to devote the attention and resources to those who have died while walking.
  - Simply including a google street view of the crash site could go a long way to provide richer context for the public.

- Given how pedestrian deaths are covered by the media, largely devoid of in-depth details, the importance of pedestrian advocacy groups is amplified.
  - American Walks, Nashville Pedestrian Death Registry, Partnership for a Walkable America, and Walk Bike America
Given that the likelihood of dying as a pedestrian are outpacing those of dying as a driver, there is an obligation on states to revise their uniform crash report standards to include more data about pedestrians.

- Simply relying on the officer to write a detailed account of the incident, as it relates to a pedestrian death, is insufficient.
- USGAO has questioned the quality of safety systems data due to inconsistent police reporting, which they identify as inhibiting progress.
- Increases the likelihood that media coverage will include more contextual details and shift away from “pedestrian-blaming.”

Policy Impact

- Effective public safety policies and strategies cannot be created without an accurate definition of public safety problems (Weiss, 1989).
- Be it “pedestrian-blaming,” low quality reporting by the police and media, or a combination of the two, all serve to distort the identification of effective policy responses to the increased likelihood that an individual will die while walking.
FUTURE RESEARCH

- More in-depth examination of the relationship between the development of police reports and the coverage of traffic crashes involving a pedestrian fatality; specifically, interviewing police and media participants.

- Investigating why certain pedestrian fatality cases are not covered by the media.

- Expanding research to more cities, and beginning to examine on the statewide level.

- Comparative research, specifically looking at coverage of pedestrian fatalities in other English-speaking countries.

- Investigating individual perceptions of pedestrian fatalities.
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PEDESTRIAN FATALITIES AND TOTAL FATALITIES IN TRAFFIC CRASHES, 2012 - 2016