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Authors

Bhuiya, Md Musfiqur Rahman

Barajas, Jesus M., PhD

Venkataram, Prashanth S., PhD

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Traffic Collisions Change How Victims Think About Safety

Md. Musfiqur Rahman Bhuiya, Doctoral Student,¹

Jesus M. Barajas, Ph.D., Associate Professor,²

Prashanth S. Venkataram, Ph.D., Postdoctoral Researcher¹

¹Institute of Transportation Studies, University of California, Davis

²Department of Environmental Science and Policy, University of California, Davis

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Issue

Traffic safety remains a pressing concern in California. Over the past five years, the state has averaged more than 3,751 reported traffic fatalities annually, with likely more unreported. While policies and research often focus on crash prevention and severity reduction, less is known about how collisions affect individuals' travel behavior and perceptions of road safety.

To better understand these effects, we conducted interviews and focus groups with people who had direct or indirect experience with traffic collisions and near misses. We also spoke with professionals who support collision victims, such as physicians, therapists, faith leaders, and advocacy groups representatives. Discussions focused on perceptions of road safety, transportation mode choices, and travel behavior of someone involved in a traffic collision or near miss before and after the incident.

Key Research Findings

After a collision or near miss, the victim's travel behavior changes dramatically. Participants reported not only changing travel modes after a crash or near miss, but also altering trip frequency, timing, and route choices. Those with serious injuries often took 3 to 12 months to resume previous travel patterns or adopt new ones. The most common changes included avoiding or reducing cycling and walking, especially at night. Some began relying on vehicles

with accessibility features due to injury-related limitations. Additionally, victims reported making sure they travel in well-lit places, even at the expense of taking less convenient or longer routes. Even when travel routines remained the same, individuals reported heightened caution, including avoiding distractions and being more aware of impaired or aggressive drivers.

Collision victims more carefully observe traffic laws and acknowledge the vulnerability of active transportation users. Many participants—both crash victims and their family members—reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress for some time following the incident. These experiences often led to greater vigilance of other road users and stricter compliance with traffic laws. Some family members developed negative attitudes towards the modes involved in the collision. Participants also expressed concern about media coverage of crashes and recommended content warnings to help them avoid psychological triggers.

Road design and policy may contribute to increased collision risk. Participants identified poor road design and car-centric development as contributing factors in crashes, especially at Intersections were viewed as particularly dangerous, and conflicting safety features—such as a tall speed bump that could slow drivers but create a hazard for e-scooter riders—were common concerns. Some felt current infrastructure favors drivers at the expense of those walking or biking, leading to unsafe conditions for all road users.

The job-housing mismatch may indirectly affect road safety. Participants hypothesized that the distance between affordable housing and job centers contributes to aggressive driving and increased risk. They suggested that long commutes and peak-hour pressures raise the likelihood of unsafe behavior on the road. Proposed solutions included increasing infill development and expanding housing assistance to allow people to live closer to their workplaces.

Recommendations for improving road safety, include language, media and educational reforms. Participants urged replacing the term accident with collision to avoid implying a lack of accountability. They also recommended school-based road safety education and public campaigns to raise awareness and promote safer travel behavior across all modes.

More Information

This policy brief is drawn from the reports “After the Crash: Post-Collision Travel Behavior and Safety Perceptions” and “Effects of Road Collisions on the Travel Behavior of Vulnerable Groups: Expert Interview Findings” both of which were prepared by Md. Musfiqur Rahman Bhuiya, Jesus M. Barajas, and Prashanth S. Venkataram with the University of California, Davis. For more information, please contact Jesus M. Barajas at jmbarajas@ucdavis.edu.

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