

# LET'S TALK ABOUT CRASHES

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Language shapes policy as well as action or inaction. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), changing the thought process and language used to describe collisions can affect not only behaviour, but also responses to motor vehicle crash events.

“Motor vehicle crashes and injuries are predictable, preventable events. The word ‘accident’ promotes the concept that these events are beyond human control.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Accident’ suggests an inevitability and unpredictability to crash events. This term inadvertently and incorrectly suggests that crashes cannot be prevented.

“Conversely, the term ‘crash’ encompasses a wider range of causes for road collisions than does the term ‘accident.’ In fact, traffic crashes are events that can be rationally analyzed and reduced through remedial action.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it has been suggested that characterizing crashes as accidents, when drivers were intoxicated or negligent may impede the recovery of crash victims by preventing them from assigning blame and working through the emotions related to their trauma.”<sup>3</sup>



## Why is the term ‘accidents’ inappropriate?

It is widely acknowledged that ‘accidents’ usually result in harm, but, there is a pervasive perception that they happen unintentionally and without malice. However, this term does not accurately describe the nature of motor vehicle crash events, and has important limitations.

- > **It suggests events are random:** ‘Accident’ is defined as an event that happens by chance or that is without apparent or deliberate cause. This term implies that events are unavoidable as opposed to resulting from a choice or greater system failure. Changing views on this front can lead to greater support for road safety interventions and programs.<sup>4</sup>
- > **It implies that no party is at fault:** ‘Accident’ implies that the event in question was not preventable nor anyone’s fault. In most collisions, neither of these two assumptions is likely to be correct. Research shows that more than 90% of collisions are due to driver errors that could have been avoided. Of equal importance, it has been suggested that for persons who have been traumatized, it is easier to persevere if they believe that they can prevent these adverse instances from re-occurring and protect others.<sup>5</sup>
- > **It is imprecise:** The term ‘accident’ provides a general explanation that an event occurred but does not explain why it occurred. The term ‘accident’ has connotations of randomness and it is defined as “an unforeseen contingency, chance or fortune”<sup>6</sup> which is an inaccurate use to describe the event.

More concerning, despite these inherent limitations, the term ‘accident’ remains institutionalized and is routinely used to describe crash events. ‘Accident’ has been used for decades in several sectors, perhaps as a result of a historical lack of understanding about contributing factors that lead to collisions.

The term 'accident' is still broadly used in government statutes, motor vehicle acts, data systems, and personal injury law.<sup>7</sup> The unintended negative consequences of perpetuating the use of this term warrant attention, and efforts to use more descriptive and appropriate language to describe crash events should be a consideration during the review of documents and practices.



### Why are the terms 'crashes or collisions' more appropriate?

The word 'crash' is a simple, factual way to describe events that are observed. Research shows that many risky behaviours by drivers are recognized and proven causal factors in crashes. In other words, crashes are not an unexpected result of these behaviours. The term 'crash' or 'collision' instead of 'accident' acknowledges that the event could have been prevented. Furthermore, using this term permits the assignment of responsibility and is consistent with the widespread adoption of these terms by injury prevention and emergency services professionals who deal with crash victims daily.

- > **It acknowledges events are preventable.** The words 'crash' or 'collision' suggest that had circumstances leading up to the event been recognized and acted upon prior to its occurrence, that this event may not have occurred. A belief that injuries can be prevented has been shown to be linked to support for legislation to prevent injuries.<sup>8</sup> A philosophy of acceptance of the "inevitable and unfortunate" is being replaced by an attitude of challenge to change what is predictable and avoidable.

- > **It acknowledges a degree of responsibility.** The term 'crash' may lead one to believe that drivers should take more responsibility to prevent or reduce the number of crashes. Continuing the uncritical use of 'accident' to characterize any or all of the possible events and experiences of a crash can potentially create more problems than it solves.<sup>9</sup> In short, by assigning some degree of responsibility to a party or parties that caused a motor vehicle crash event, it reinforces the fact that risk-taking has consequences.
- > **It acknowledges acceptance of new terminology by professionals.** Editors of the British Medical Journal recognized that the word 'accident' was well-established in discourse among both medical professionals and lay readers when it announced their decision to ban the word 'accident' from use in the Journal.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the term "motor vehicle accidents" was persistently used by clinicians and researchers who assumed that most vehicular crashes were events that were random, unintentional, or undeniably accidental.<sup>11</sup> This demonstrates that the consistent adoption of more appropriate terminology to describe crash events is achievable and should be pursued.

### Call to action

Road safety stakeholders are encouraged to consistently adopt appropriate terminology to describe road crash events as predictable and preventable in public and routine communications. In particular, fostering relationships with media is essential in the short-term to increase awareness and understanding of this issue. The pervasive use of 'accident' in news coverage is a source of concern and must be overcome to instill a public health framework to understand the crash problem and ensure Canadians recognize the preventable nature of collisions, fatalities and injuries. This is an immediate need.



Moving forward, the institutionalized use of the term 'accident' in statutes, policy and data systems must be reviewed during the course of broader initiatives to modernize and update these tools across many different systems. In many instances, the use of the term often pre-dates understanding of the crash problem, and changing its usage would be quite challenging to change in the short-term and have far-reaching effects. Initiatives to make such improvements are infrequent precisely because they are complex, costly and time-consuming. As such, the consistent adoption of appropriate terminology should be a consideration of these initiatives as they occur.

The medical profession provides much-needed leadership in this regard, and illustrates that such large-scale change is a worthy challenge that can be achieved. Other sectors, industries and professionals are encouraged to demonstrate leadership and consistently describe crashes and collisions using appropriate terminology.

## Sources

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171 Nepean Street, Suite 200  
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0B4  
Phone: (877) 238-5235  
Email: [tirf@tirf.ca](mailto:tirf@tirf.ca)  
Website: [tirf.ca](http://tirf.ca)

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