



## **Case Study Series**

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# **Changing perceptions on Vision Zero in Canada: A media audit**

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# Changing perceptions on Vision Zero in Canada: A media audit

*Parachute Vision Zero creates case studies that feature a variety of issues and examples of Vision Zero from across Canada and around the world. We hope these practical, evidence-based case studies will help educate, inform and inspire those who are interested in getting to zero. We share when we publish new case studies through our e-newsletter, **Word on the Street**.*

## Excerpt

This case study, developed with generous support from Desjardins, reviews media coverage in various Canadian jurisdictions related to Vision Zero. This point-in-time audit compares media coverage over two time periods, reflecting on changes, or lack thereof, over time in language used to report on road safety, apportion of blame for injury and incidents on the road, as well as the frequency and tone of Vision Zero discussions.

## Vision Zero in Canada

Vision Zero is a road safety strategy aimed at eliminating all serious injury and death on roads. Originating in Sweden in the 1990s, arising from a belief that serious injury and death were both preventable and ethically unacceptable, Vision Zero has been adopted by municipal and provincial jurisdictions across Canada<sup>1</sup>. Injury and death on Canada's roads, remains an issue; Transport Canada data from 2018 show that the number of fatalities rose 3.6 per cent from the prior year, with a total of 1922 deaths and nearly 10,000 serious injuries<sup>2</sup>.

## Case Study Summary

The frequency with which Vision Zero was mentioned in the media reviewed increased over time in almost all jurisdictions and across publications, with the exception of the Edmonton Sun, which referenced Vision Zero less in the second time period (2017-2018) than in the first (2018-2019).

Language used to describe road safety incidents wavered across the first period with alternating use of "collisions" and "accidents" in the first review period across publications and a greater reliance on the more accurate "collision" language in the

second review period because using the word “accident” implies that there was no way to predict or prevent the occurrence.

Save for the Edmonton Sun and New York Post, there was a general sense from the articles reviewed that drivers and poor road design were responsible for the prevalence of injury and death on roadways. The emphasis on poor pedestrian and cyclist behaviour by columnists for the Edmonton Sun and New York Post was not echoed by their counterparts at other news agencies who argued that drivers, operating multi-tonne vehicles, had a greater degree of responsibility for road safety than those on foot or on bicycles. The emphasis on driver responsibility, where blame was assigned to them, was consistent across the first and second review period, but there was increased emphasis on road design and political inertia as causes for continued harms on roads during the second review period.

As greater attention was being paid to Vision Zero strategies in each jurisdiction, there was greater engagement on the issue from columnists and citizens alike with more articles arguing for more and faster movement from government leaders on substantive changes to improve road safety such as speed cameras, reduced speed limits, vehicle design changes and the building of dedicated bike lanes to reduce the incidence of road injury and fatality.

## Methodology

This Case Study compared media reporting on Vision Zero across two periods of time: January 2017 through the end of June 2018 and the beginning of July 2018 through the end of December 2019.

Relying on electronic editions of newspapers, the review focused on highlighting articles that focused specifically Vision Zero as a concept or referenced Vision Zero when discussing incidents of injury or death on the road. The review sought to examine how language was used over to time to discuss Vision Zero, road safety and road safety improvement over time.

In order to assess for both evolution in language as well as frequency of coverage about Vision Zero, identical searches were conducted using national print media as well as newspapers in Vancouver, Edmonton, Toronto, Montreal and New York, the latter being used as a North American comparator.

Once articles were identified, they were read with a view to establishing whether:

- Vision Zero was either mentioned or mentioned and defined;
- What language was used to reference the event on the road (collision, accident, incident);
- To whom or what was blame assigned, when it was assigned (driver, cyclist, pedestrian, infrastructure).

Once each article was read and coded with these themes in mind, the data from the first period of time were compared to the second period in time to provide an over-time sense of changes in language, frequency of reference to Vision Zero and to reflect on the ways in which the efficacy of the Vision Zero strategy were being reported. Reports for each of the reviewed media articles were combined and compared to determine whether any trends could be identified both over time and across jurisdictions.

## Overview

### *Vancouver, B.C.*

In 2016, British Columbia adopted a Vision Zero approach to road safety strategy, the first Canadian province to do so. The experience of Vancouver, B.C.'s most populous city, is provided through a review of the **Vancouver Sun** and provides a unique insight into the attitudes and impact of Vision Zero for those in Canada's most western province.

### **Vancouver Sun**

The Vancouver Sun, a daily newspaper printed in British Columbia and owned by Postmedia launched in 1912 and has a daily average circulation of 136,787<sup>3</sup>.

The Sun had a consistently uninterested view across the entire period of review. There seemed to be minimal effort to report on Vision Zero and little shift in this apathy over time.



The first review saw only one effort to define Vision Zero in the two articles where it was mentioned. In both instances, Vision Zero was referenced in opposing opinion pieces. In a column, Pam Fayerman arguing in favour of reduced speed limits as a strategy to improve road safety, a brief description of Vision Zero and some jurisdictions where the strategy had been adopted (Sweden, the U.K., the Netherlands and Germany) was included to highlight Canada's relative ineptness in road safety. The need to revisit and roll back speed limits was underscored by Fayerman, noting that "on many highways, the higher-speed cars ("85th percentile") were travelling faster than the speed limit".

The author of the responding opinion piece, Ian Tootill, cited Germany as an example, when arguing that reduced speed limits were not the answer – as evidenced by German's "high and sometimes unlimited speed limits and ... fewer fatalities proportion to their population base". While mentioning Vision Zero casually, the piece notes that speed alone is not the reason for road injury and fatalities and that driver incompetence is to blame. Tootill, the co-founder of driver advocacy organization SENSE B.C., argues that, rather than adopting strategies aimed at reducing speed, the focus should be on improving driver awareness and competence to reduce injury.

The later review of the Sun found little change. Vision Zero was mentioned only once and not defined at all. In articles referencing road incidents, the language varied with accident, crash/crashes, and collisions used almost interchangeably throughout the period of review, though collision was favoured, used to report on 75 per cent of such cases. Speed limits were cited as contributing to road injury and fatalities in an article reporting on the release of study data noted a correlation between increases in rural speed limits to a subsequent increase in injury (October 10, 2018). The study authors, Emergency Physician Dr. Jeff Brubacher and his University of British Columbia co-authors, encouraged jurisdictions to "resist pressure from pro-speed advocates to raise speed limits without due consideration to road safety."

There were also several articles acknowledging the role of human agency in causing collisions. An article on a Coroner's report noted that "one third of the total number of deaths from motor vehicle incidents between 2008 and 2016 involved drugs and/or alcohol" and that "between 2011 and 2016, 29 per cent of drivers and passengers who died were not wearing a seatbelt or strapped into a car seat" (May 16, 2019). A separate study by BCAA found that 20 per cent of millennial drivers believed that driving under the influence of cannabis was safe (July 17, 2018).

There was little change between the first and second review periods. Vision Zero was mentioned and defined infrequently in both periods, there was no effort to assign blame, either indirectly or directly, by using language that identified whether the vehicle or driver was responsible for striking pedestrians.

## ***Edmonton, Alberta***

Edmonton is the capital city of the Prairie province of Alberta, with a population of 972,000 in 2019. In September 2015, Edmonton became the first major Canadian city to adopt Vision Zero as a road safety strategy<sup>4</sup>. Given their relatively lengthy experience using a Vision Zero Framework, the media reporting on the topic provide a unique picture in Canada of attitudes and impact of Vision Zero in the wider public.

Both the first and second review surveyed the Edmonton Sun, a right-leaning tabloid paper and the Edmonton Journal; a centrist broadsheet publication. The Sun and the Journal are both owned by Postmedia. The former has an average daily circulation of 37,649, while the latter has an average daily readership of 92,542<sup>3</sup>.

### **Edmonton Sun**

The Edmonton Sun is a daily newspaper and website published in Edmonton, Alberta. The newspaper was founded in 1978.

The Sun had a consistently unfavourable view across the entire period reviewed with little shift over time. The first review saw limited defining of Vision Zero when it was mentioned in articles related to road safety. Primarily mentioned in opinion pieces, Vision Zero was positioned in the first review as a needless use of taxpayer dollars, promoting the misguided notion that drivers alone were to blame for road fatalities. Using language that shifted between “accident” and “collision”, the pieces reviewed stated there was an inordinate focus on the general fault of drivers when in fact a few inexperienced ones were likely to blame. There was limited support expressed for lower speed limits as a strategy to improve road safety in recognition of the fact that higher speed limits contributed to the incidence of fatalities.



The second review of Sun articles found that little had changed. Vision Zero was mentioned specifically very few times in the period of review and defined even less. The tone of the articles was largely unfavourable, even when they were not opinion pieces. There was less use of specific language e.g. “collision” vs “accident”, making it hard to track changes over time in this regard. The prevailing sentiment continued to be that the city’s focus on Vision Zero lacked an appreciation for the role that non-drivers play in creating collisions and that the addition of alternative vehicles like E-scooters isn’t prudent since the city seems to have an anti-vehicle bent. Just as the earlier Sun articles made it clear that drivers alone aren’t to blame, so too did the later ones – levelling some of the blame at pedestrians for their role in creating unsafe conditions.

### **Edmonton Journal**

The Edmonton Journal, is a daily newspaper and website, published in Edmonton Alberta. The newspaper was founded in 1903.

The earlier articles from the Edmonton Journal that mention Vision Zero were more pure news and less opinion-oriented than those in the Sun. There was no consistency in defining Vision Zero in articles where the strategy was mentioned. In more cases than not, Vision Zero was mentioned but not defined.



Though the coverage was less negative, there were some questions raised about the veracity of some of the assumptions underlying Vision Zero, such as whether speed or infrastructure changes would necessarily lead to improvements in road safety or simply undermine the physical character of communities. Specifically, the issue of speed limits and survivability data was questioned, with columnist David Staples of the Journal arguing that city relied on “flawed data” from a 2008 World Health Organization study. He argued it relied on earlier studies that “overestimate the fatality risks” associated with 40km/h speed limits (April 25, 2018).

The media reports were also reviewed to determine if the reporting blamed or excused parties involved in collisions: did a “driver strike a pedestrian” or did a “car strike a pedestrian”, which implies that a thing, not a person, is at fault. Generally, language was neutral, neither assigning blame nor excusing one party or another. However, there were intermittent references to “accidents” or people being “killed by” a vehicle present

throughout the first review period. Overall sentiment was that the city was designed for cars, not pedestrians or cyclists to move through it, and that shifts to infrastructure will only follow cultural changes in the way the public understands communities and road safety.

The second review of the Edmonton Journal beginning July 2018 shows changes over time. Where Vision Zero was more frequently mentioned but not defined in earlier articles, later coverage tended to define the strategy in about half the instances where it was mentioned. Reporting focused largely on the efforts of municipal government to shift the strategy around Vision Zero as data about various road safety concerns and efforts became available.

For example, when data around the impact of speeding in school zones became available, enforcement efforts were stepped up and there was follow-up reporting on the efficacy of those efforts in reducing speed infractions. The use of photo radar and reducing speed limits were featured topics in many articles over the period of review.

The language used from January through the end of December 2019 consistently relied on “collision” to describe a vehicle incident but, prior to that point, there had been several references to “accidents” or “crashes” instead. There were no references to vehicles striking or hitting people, a marked change from the first review period. Drivers were overwhelmingly cited as responsible for collisions, though in some instances pedestrians and cyclists were also seen as contributing. Other causes identified including road design, infrastructure issues, including a lack of bike lanes, and vehicle design such as seatbelt flaws.

## ***Toronto, Ontario***

The Vision Zero safety plan launched in July 2016 in the City of Toronto, Canada’s largest city with 2.9 million residents. The plan includes a vision for reducing traffic related fatalities and serious injuries over the five-year period between 2017 and 2021<sup>5</sup>.

The media analysis reviewed both the Toronto Star, the city’s largest newspaper, and coverage of Toronto’s Vision Zero efforts in The Globe and Mail which, while a national paper, is based in Toronto.

## Toronto Star

A respected, left-leaning publication, the Toronto Star, like its competitor the Globe and Mail, is well-regarded. As the highest circulating Canadian newspaper<sup>6</sup>, the Star can be reasonably expected to reflect the views of much of its audience.



The review of the Toronto Star that ended at the midpoint of 2018 found Vision Zero referenced in more than 50 unique articles and defined in the majority of cases where it was mentioned. The language used throughout the Star's reports during this period most often were "collision", "accident" and "crash", used largely interchangeably.

Where articles took a position on which party was to blame, the responsibility fell not to drivers but to the inanimate vehicles they were operating, as in "pedestrian struck by a vehicle" or "hit by vehicle" or reports of a pedestrian "colliding with a vehicle". There were also references to the need for broader infrastructure changes such as more connected bike lanes as a way to ameliorate the inevitable mistakes that would be made by drivers. On this theme, there were also calls for strategies aimed to curb driver behaviours that were seen as significantly contributing to the incidence of road injury and deaths, including reckless driver behaviour. There were calls for greater effort to address driver error and irresponsibility, including improved driver education campaigns and reduced speed limits. Opposing voices called for greater action to address the impact of all road users who were identified as playing a part in unsafe practices and pushback against efforts to reduce speeds as the first step in improving road safety.

The newspaper's opinion pieces, while cognizant of the role that cyclists, pedestrians and drivers alike have in both "improving safety...and transform[ing] a city" (June 14, 2018), were also critical of efforts to spread responsibility for road safety around equally: "Vehicles are the most dangerous element and drivers have a greater responsibility to care" (June 14, 2018).

The subsequent review, which picked up at midpoint 2018, found 54 references to Vision Zero with the strategy defined in all but 17 instances.

Language was consistent in apportioning blame to drivers rather than their vehicles with references to "collided", "collision", "struck by motorist", and "struck by driver" consistently used, particularly in the latter half of the review period. Through to early

2019, there were some intermittent references to more neutral blame language as noted above, i.e. “struck by car” and struck by vehicle”.

Of the seven articles by columnists referencing Vision Zero, there was little complaint about the strategy itself. A July 2018 column spoke to the lack of public awareness of the strategy, with only one in three Toronto residents aware of Vision Zero and a majority reporting that streets were unsafe for pedestrians. The editorials pushed levels of government to take swifter, strong action to improve road safety including improvements in bike lane access and reduced speed limits. Columnist Emma Teitel pushed back on the equal blame narrative, noting that “pedestrian deaths doubled in Honolulu in 2018, despite ... a ban on distracted walking”, challenging the city not to scapegoat pedestrians for the complex problem of improving road safety (September 6, 2019). The need for consistent language from media was the subject of an end-of-review-period opinion letter that spoke out against blame-neutral language and encouraged writing that accurately reflects the role of drivers in pedestrians deaths. “Instead of writing driver mounts curb and kills two pedestrians, we’re being forced to read ‘two pedestrians killed.’ ” (December 29, 2019).

## Globe and Mail

The Globe and Mail, published nationally in Canada, is often referred to as “Canada’s

newspaper of record.” and as the “most-read newspaper in the country” (Globe and Mail, 2018)



The review of the Globe ending in mid-2018 identified 11 articles where Vision Zero in Toronto had been referenced, with the program defined in all but three instances.

In all but one case, the articles reported on road safety and the need for continued work to improve the road for all who use them. The language used throughout did not directly or indirectly assign blame to one party or another, focusing instead of moving beyond the driver / pedestrian / cyclist narrative, instead emphasizing the impact of policy, political inaction and infrastructure as contributing to the ongoing number of collisions and deaths on roads. Inertia in improving road safety, prioritizing the importance of drivers and cars rather than taking steps to recognize the shared rights of all of the city’s inhabitants to safe road access, was a recurring theme throughout the articles reviewed.

In the one editorial on Vision Zero in Toronto, the focus was largely on the failures of the Vision Zero strategy to promote safety and prevent injury and death. At the time of the editorial, there had been 21 cyclist and pedestrian deaths in Toronto the first 23 weeks of 2018, prompting the Editorial Board to write that “the carnage to date in 2018 is not an aberration but is, in fact, the new normal in Canada's largest city” (Globe Editorial June 18, 2018).

In the second review period, which ended in December 2019, there was an increase in the number of articles referencing Vision Zero, with 17 mentions of the strategy and definitions of same in all but three instances. The language used throughout was generally blame neutral, speaking of collision, fatality, and road deaths. There were several articles noting the role of human agency in choosing to drive more quickly and increasing the risks to pedestrians and cyclists with calls for stricter enforcement by police to discourage risky behaviour by all road users. In a few instances, cyclist behaviour was identified as at least contributing to incidence of collisions, calling for improved cyclist education while also recognizing the limits of education campaigns for either cyclists, pedestrians or drivers in changing rates of death and injury.

An article by Urban Affairs Reporter Oliver Moore pointed to the clear need for “sustained improvement in safety for those on foot” recognizing that well-established patterns in behaviour take time to improve and that “fixing a road system built over generations takes time, and some ideas for improvement are complicated” (December 31, 2019). Improvements in infrastructure, road and vehicle design were proposed as necessary interventions to promote lasting change.

In both periods of the review, the Globe and Mail focused less on identifying the party responsible at the micro level and more on highlighting the type of macro level proposals likely to result in lasting change. Vision Zero as a strategy was neither vilified nor praised and was clearly defined in more cases than it was not.

## Montreal

“Because every life counts:” that’s the slogan associated with Montreal’s Vision Zero strategy<sup>7</sup>. Introduced by previous Mayor Denis Coderre and formerly introduced by his successor Mayor Valerie Plante, Vision Zero was introduced formally in Montreal in October 2019 with the aim of eliminating pedestrian deaths by 2021<sup>8</sup>. Montreal is the largest city in the francophone province of Quebec and the second-largest city in Canada.

The study review examines Vision Zero coverage in the English-language Montreal Gazette and the French-language Journal de Montréal; the latter study was done originally in French and appears here in translation.

## Montreal Gazette

The Montreal Gazette is the only English-language daily newspaper published in Montreal, Quebec. It has an average daily circulation of 80,895<sup>3</sup>.

In the first review period, which ended just as politicians began to publicly ponder adopting the strategy, Vision Zero was mentioned 23 times and defined in eight instances in Montreal's English-language daily.



There was consistency in the use of language, with references to “accidents” more frequent than any other term to describe road incidents. Nearing the end of the review period, there were a few references to “collision”. In announcing his plans for Vision Zero at a campaign rally, Coderre noted that “Everybody owns the roads and every time there’s an accident, it’s one too many,” (August 29, 2017), echoing the tone of many of the Gazette’s early articles on the strategy. While there were few articles specifically blaming a single party for collisions, there were references to driver error and resultant cyclist and pedestrian fear. However, a persistent theme was the need for shared responsibility on the roads and recognition of shared interests.

As discussion of Vision Zero increased in the public domain, the question arose of balancing safety of cyclists and pedestrians without totally alienating drivers, who have a variety of legitimate reasons for using cars. “If you Band-Aid a solution to one thing, you just move the problem somewhere else. You really need a holistic view of the issue of safe mobility and safe access on the territory,” said H  l  ne Pana  oti, director of organization dedicated to protecting and promoting Mount Royal who was concerned about some of the strategy’s unintended impacts. While reporting on the facts of the strategy, there was little opining from columnists or others, as the Vision Zero implementation became a politically charged campaign issue, there was some discussion of costs associated with strategy implementation, though this was less the sentiment expressed by the paper, but an issue raised by Coderre’s opponent and eventual successor.

In the latter half of the review, there were 24 articles referencing Vision Zero, with a definition provided in half of those cases.

As with earlier instances, the language used to describe road incidents remained inconsistent, particularly as it related to ways in which the parties to collisions were described. Language such as “hit by garbage truck”, “struck by car” was favoured throughout with very few references that recognize the operator of the vehicle, such as “hit by motorist” or “driver”. Consistent with the review from 2017 to mid 2019, “accidents” was used in more cases than “collision”, though the latter appeared more frequently than it had in the previous review period. All road users (drivers, pedestrians and cyclists) were seen to be contributing to the injuries and deaths on Montreal’s roads, although it was clear that drivers bore more of the blame, even when the language identified the incident as an “accident”.

Montreal Gazette city columnist Allison Hanes, noted as much in an April 24, 2019 piece, highlight that “motorists speeding in school zones and on neighbourhood streets, running yellow and red lights, rolling through stop signs, texting and driving or aggressively swerving around cyclists are a common sight. Sure, there are distracted pedestrians and cyclists, too”. The move toward Vision Zero, with its multipronged approach, was viewed as appropriate and necessary by Hanes in an earlier article, referencing the strategy in light of ongoing road safety issues with calls for all parties to adjust attitudes toward road safety “even if the laws of both physics and logic should demand that those with the potential to inflict the most harm (a.k.a. drivers of cars and trucks) bear an added burden of responsibility for the safety of more vulnerable users...it is still in the interests of cyclists and pedestrians to proceed with a little extra caution”.

The general tone of articles in the later review period was largely neutral, reporting on the implementation of Vision Zero, including that which still needs to be achieved and noting that road injury remained a challenge throughout the period of review.

## **Le Journal de Montréal**

Le Journal de Montréal is a daily tabloid newspaper published in Montreal and owned by Quebecor Media. In Quebec, it is the daily newspaper with the largest readership, 2,752,000 readers in both digital and print formats (data from 2017).



“There is no acceptable loss of life,” Le Journal de Montréal described for the first time in 2016, prior to our review’s period, citing one of the key principles of Vision Zero, announced during the Vision Zero presentation speech by Denis Coderre, then mayor of Montreal. “We have to go further and adapt our actions to a context which has changed a lot, where one in five trips is made by active transport, either walking or cycling.” The tone and the will were stated unequivocally. Even though the concept of Vision Zero was defined, the newspaper only talked about a “Vision Zero strategy”, in language that will evolve over time toward “a commitment to Vision Zero” to only using the term “Vision Zero” without paraphrasing, with the full name marking the public’s highest level of familiarization with the concept and denoting the effective commitment to Vision Zero by Montreal.

There are seven articles on road safety themes citing Vision Zero or dealing with Vision Zero in this first media study period in Le Journal de Montréal. The terminology used is constant: “accidents”, “accident-prone areas”, “road accidents”, not calling into question the system failures that could be the cause of these deadly collisions. The terminology evolves throughout the year 2018, as we will see below. Hand in hand with the traditional understanding of “accidental” collisions, most of the time motorists and motor vehicles are blamed as are their dangerous driving behaviours, especially speed, with expressions such as “force motorists to slow down”, and “slowing down drivers”. It was not until later in 2017 that the conversation would turn more toward infrastructure with the debate on allowing right turns at red lights, to which Mayor Coderre and several organizations such as Vélo Québec and Piéton Québec objected. It is interesting to note that Le Journal de Montréal then directly attributed blame to infrastructure by personifying the right turn on red: “it is responsible”; “it caused six deaths”.

The second period of this review is marked by the change in governance at the City of Montreal with the start of the mandate of the new mayor elected earlier in November 2017. In March 2019, the first quote in Le Journal de Montréal relating to Vision Zero by Valérie Plante after her election is: “We too often witness collisions that cause serious injuries, sometimes even deaths. Collectively, we can no longer accept this.” This first statement by the new mayor is interesting because, on the one hand, it introduces the principle of collective and shared responsibility, which is in line with the founding principles of Vision Zero according to which we are all responsible, and on the other hand changes the lexical depiction of the “accident” to “collision”. This, more general use is then used much more frequently by the newspaper: “fatal collisions”, “collisions”, as well as more neutral expressions such as “dangerous situations”.

This second period includes three articles on Vision Zero which often blame The City of Montreal. In an article on September 12, 2018, Nicolas Saunier, Professor, Chair of Mobility at Polytechnique Montréal said, “It has been two years since Montreal adopted the Vision Zero approach but I don’t think that elected officials are aware of what this involves.” Lionel Perez, leader of the official opposition at City Hall, later fuelled the controversy by saying in November 2019: “Projet Montréal promised in its first year in power to make the 20 most dangerous intersections safe. This hasn't been done.”

But regardless of the political differences or considerations, the debate has gradually and unanimously shifted toward road infrastructure: “The increase in pedestrian deaths is attributed to our streets” was a headline in the Journal de Montréal at the end of 2018. According to Marie-Soleil Cloutier of the Institut national de la recherche scientifique, “the only thing to blame is our road network.” According to Piétons Québec, the major issue concerns city “arteries”, where “coexistence is most difficult between pedestrians and motor vehicles”. That opinion is shared by the Société de l'assurance automobile du Québec (SAAQ), which indicates that “44 per cent of accidents with bodily injury involving at least one pedestrian took place on arteries in 2015.”

## ***New York City (USA)***

On the heels of deadly 2013, which saw 16,059 pedestrians and cyclists injured and 178 killed on New York City roads<sup>9</sup>, newly elected Mayor Bill DeBlasio adopted a Vision Zero approach in the first weeks of his term of office. More than six years into Vision Zero, New York, with a population of 8.3 M is the most populous U.S. city, serves as a complex, transborder comparative jurisdiction for the purpose of this review, which looked at Vision Zero coverage in The New York Times and the New York Post.

### **New York Times**

Founded in 1851 and regarded as the city’s paper of record for many years, the New York Times is one of the most influential newspapers in both the City of New York and in the United States more broadly.

The New York Times has covered Vision Zero since its adoption by the city. Between 2017 and July 2018, there

## **The New York Times**

were 31 references to the Vision Zero strategy, with clear definitions of same in 25 of those instances. Language was inconsistent throughout in both describing road events (variably

“accident”, “incident”, and “crashes”), and in the way blame was ascribed throughout with examples ranging from “Chevy Impala struck...cyclist”, and “hit by Porsche” to “struck by car driven by”. The latter example clearly acknowledged the role of driver responsibility in a way the former examples do not. There was no dominant linguistic choice, though driver negligence and error were noted in many instances.

A number of articles reflected on the need for more substantive policy infrastructure changes to address road injury and death. In one columnist Emma Fitzsimmons, the author likened the number of American road deaths to the opioid crisis and called for a response commensurate with a crisis (January 10, 2017). Calls for expanded bike lane systems and other structural changes were championed by safety advocates. Reporting on efforts to encourage greater action by the government, Fitzsimmons interviews Paul Steely White, director of a transportation advocacy group, who argues that driver behaviour change alone would be insufficient to address the crisis and that infrastructure changes needed to be prioritized by the incoming Mayor: “No. 1 for the mayor – to fix those badly designed streets ... move more quickly on street redesigns” (January 10, 2017). The general tone of the Times articles, while supportive of Vision Zero, generally echoed advocate sentiment that more needed to be done to ensure that the city met its 2024 zero death target.

In the review of the New York Times that began in 2018 and ended in 2019, there were 19 references to Vision Zero with strategy definition included all but three times.

Like the earlier review period, there was some alternating language in describing road events as either “crash” or “collision” reflecting a departure from the earlier language. While the references to inanimate vehicles hitting pedestrians and cyclists continued, i.e. vehicles “hit by vehicle”, “hit by truck”, “truck struck tourist”, these references were intermingled with some that more accurately reflected to role of the vehicle operator i.e., “driver jumped the curb”. Though there was little to no consistency in language used to describe incidents, the underlying tone and facts of articles did lean toward consistent blame for drivers, even when the language didn’t directly state that drivers were responsible.

While generally reporting included favourable framing of Vision Zero, the lone editorial by the Times Editorial Board called for more aggressive efforts to protect cyclists and pedestrians after seeing a reversal in decreases in pedestrian and cyclist fatalities: “For more than a decade now, New York City has challenged the reign of the car, making

streets safer and more welcoming for those who pedal and walk...On street safety, as with many other issues, the mayor needs to think bigger, and more creatively” (Aug. 15, 2019).

## The New York Post

The New York Post is a daily tabloid newspaper published in New York City, New York. It has the highest Sunday circulation among New York tabloid newspapers.

Due to limits on database accessibility, this publication was only reviewed in the second 2018/2019 review period. It had a decidedly less favourable view of



Vision Zero. There were 26 references to the strategy over the period of analysis, with only 12 defined mentions. The language used by Post writers, like their Times colleagues, was inconsistent but relied mostly on “crashes” with two references to “accidents”. When it came to ascribing blame for collisions, there was wavering with various road users (drivers, cyclists, pedestrians) blamed with language varying even when reporting on the same collision: different authors reported that a fatality resulted when a “truck collided with” a cyclist and a cyclist was “killed by a driver”. Unlike the Times, little coverage was given to matters of infrastructure or policy except in the Post Editorial Board’s piece arguing that Mayor DeBlasio’s policy decisions were based on flawed ideology that mistakenly blames drivers “trying to do their jobs” for an increase in cyclist injuries and fatalities (July 27, 2019).

Drivers alone were disproportionately shouldering responsibility for road safety when, in the Post Editors’ view, collisions were an inevitable result of more road users. “The drive to make New York more bike-friendly has more people riding more bikes more miles — which leads to more bicycle accidents, fatal and otherwise” (July 27, 2019).

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