

Opposition to the Use of "Accident" in Motor Vehicle and Traffic Injury Terminology

Summary:

The term "accident" is commonly used to describe incidents involving motor vehicles. This terminology, however, is increasingly viewed as inappropriate and misleading within the fields of road safety, public health, and injury prevention. In Canadian, British, and European contexts, leading organizations advocate for replacing "accident" with impartial terms like "collision" or "crash" to more accurately reflect the preventable nature of these events.

IPC calls upon professionals and policy makers to adopt internal policies defining the language used to describe events or incidents in which a traffic collision has occurred. Similarly, IPC has implemented such a policy to adopt the terms "Road Traffic Collision" (RTC) and / or "Road Traffic Incident" (RTI) as standard lexicon, rather than the more commonly used "Motor Vehicle Collision" which is exclusive of other modalities of transport and users of transport infrastructure.

Why the term "Accident" Is Problematic

The term "accident" implies an event that is unforeseen and unavoidable, suggesting a lack of culpability or preventability. This connotation can diminish the perceived responsibility of individuals and systems involved, potentially hindering efforts to implement effective safety measures. As noted by Parachute, Canada's national injury prevention organization, referring to road incidents as "accidents" can obscure the fact that such events are often predictable and preventable.¹



Canadian Perspective

In Canada, the shift away from using "accident" aligns with the Vision Zero initiative, which aims to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries. Parachute's Vision Zero campaign emphasizes that road safety incidents result from a combination of factors, including human behavior, vehicle design, and infrastructure, all of which can be addressed through systemic changes.¹

One such change that is known to shape beliefs and attitudes towards collisions and injury is the language we use to talk about them.² Renowned traffic researcher, Leonard Evans, reasoned that since the term "accident" conveys fate and a lack of rational explanation, it was in direct conflict and an impediment to efforts to understand how injuries occur and how to reduce harm.³ In 2016, the Associated Press Style Guide was amended to encourage the use of the terms "crash", "collision" or similar instead of "accident". However, in Canada, there was no such national standard until a 2021 revision to the Canadian Press Stylebook.

British Perspective

In the United Kingdom, the movement to replace "accident" with more accurate terminology has gained significant momentum. RoadPeace, a national charity supporting road crash victims, has long advocated for the use of terms like "collision" or "crash," arguing that "accident" implies inevitability and downplays human error or negligence.⁴ This perspective is supported by the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines, developed by journalist Laura Laker in collaboration with the University of Westminster's Active Travel Academy, which urge media and authorities to avoid the term "accident" in favor of more precise language.

Furthermore, National Highways, the government-owned company responsible for operating England's motorways and major roads, has decided to phase out the use of "accident" in its communications, acknowledging that most road crashes are preventable incidents caused by human actions.⁵ This change reflects a broader shift in language aimed at promoting accountability and enhancing public understanding of road safety issues.

European Perspective

Similarly, in Europe, the European Transport Safety Council (ETSC) promotes the Safe System approach, which acknowledges human error but focuses on designing a transport system that prevents such errors from leading to fatalities or serious injuries.⁶ This approach underscores the importance of recognizing road incidents as preventable events rather than unavoidable accidents.



Recommendations

To foster a culture of accountability and prevention, it is recommended that:

1. **Media and Communication:** Journalists and communicators should adopt terms like "collision" or "crash" instead of "accident" when reporting on road incidents.
2. **Policy and Legislation:** Government agencies and policymakers should revise official documents and legislation to replace "accident" with more accurate terminology.
3. **Public Education:** Educational campaigns should inform the public about the preventable nature of road incidents and the importance of using appropriate terminology.

By re-framing our language, we acknowledge the role of human and systemic factors in road safety and reinforce the commitment to preventing traffic-related injuries and fatalities.



References

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