



# Media Framing of Fatal Bicyclist Crashes in Hillsborough County: A Critical Discourse Analysis

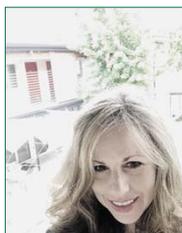
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CENTER FOR URBAN TRANSPORTATION RESEARCH

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## Research Overview

### Research Objective

To examine the linguistic choices that frame relationships between bicyclists and other parties involved in fatal crash events

### Data Collection

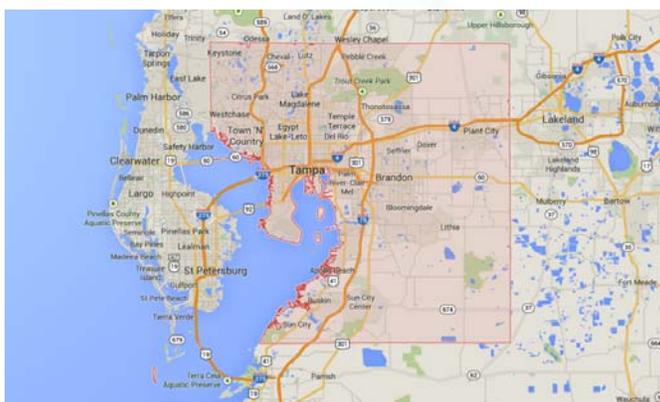
Textual data were collected from 189 media reports of the 94 bicyclist traffic fatalities that occurred from January 2009 – to June 2018 in Hillsborough County, Florida

### Methods

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), qualitative method used to analyze oral and written communication



## Site of Study – Hillsborough County, FL



### Hillsborough County, Florida

#### 2017 Population Estimates

**1,408,566**

*Source: Vintage 2017 Population Estimates*

#### Median Household Income

**\$ 51,681**

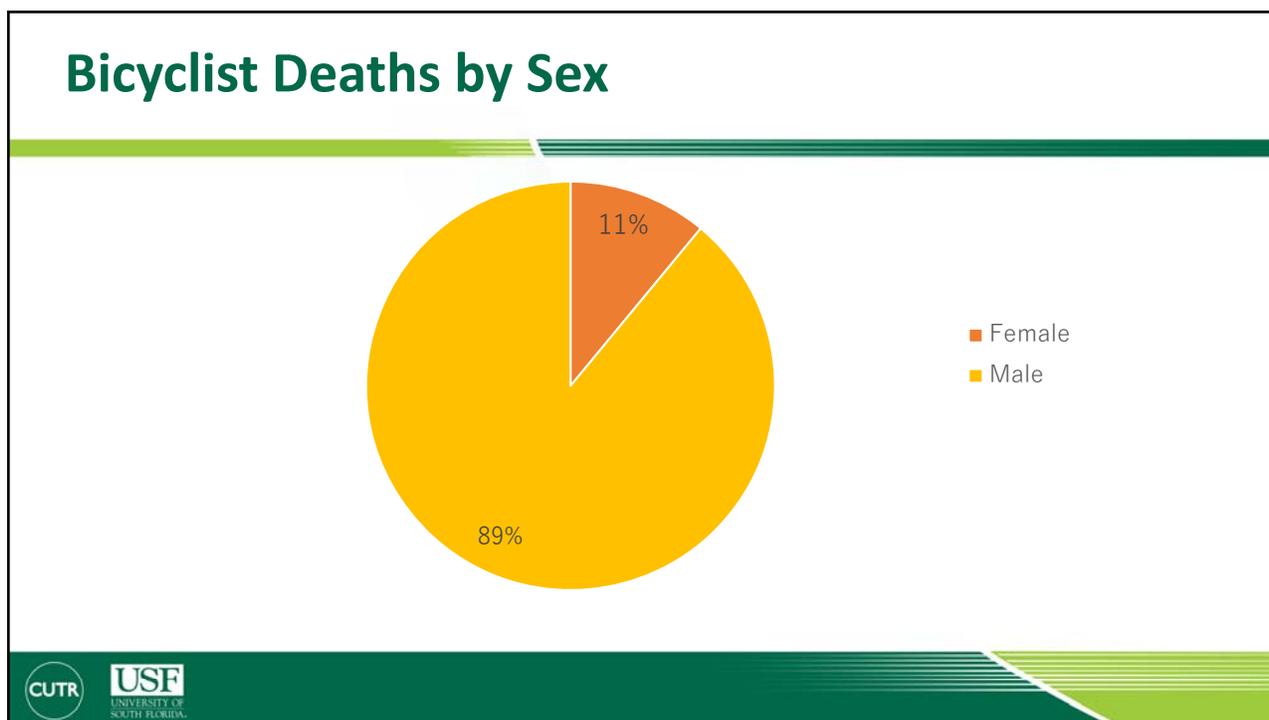
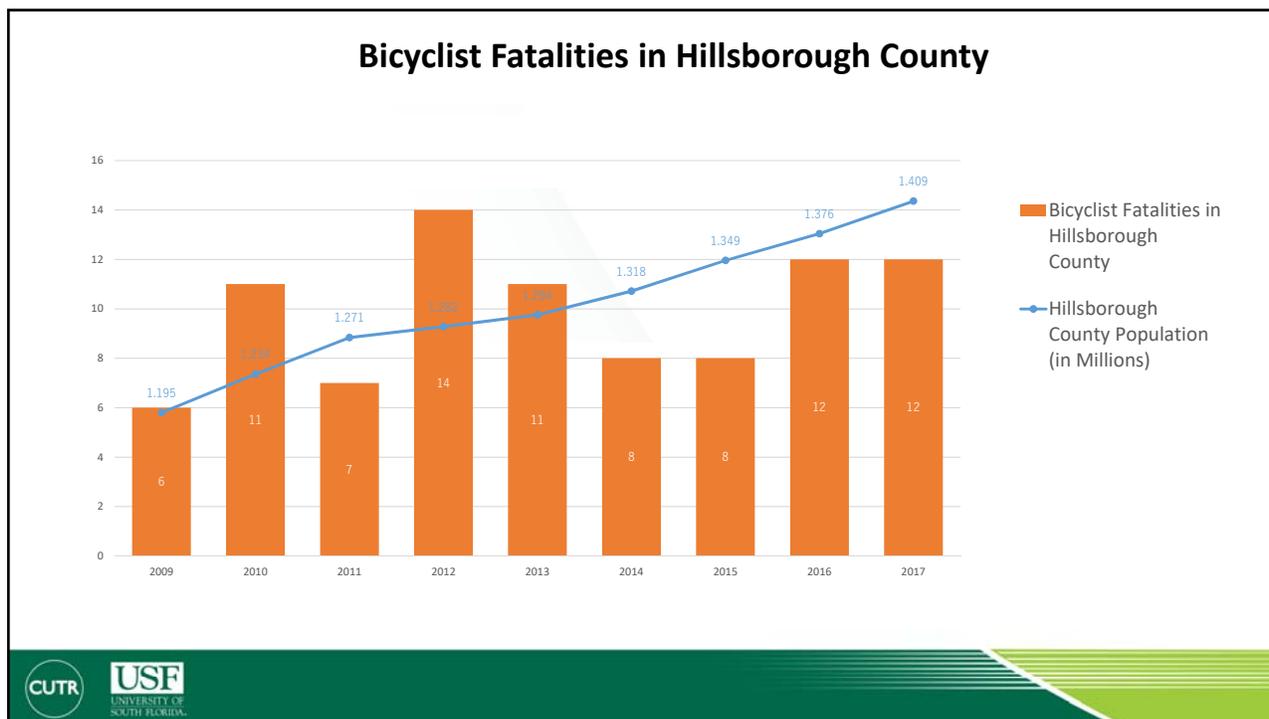
*Source: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates*

#### Persons in poverty, percent

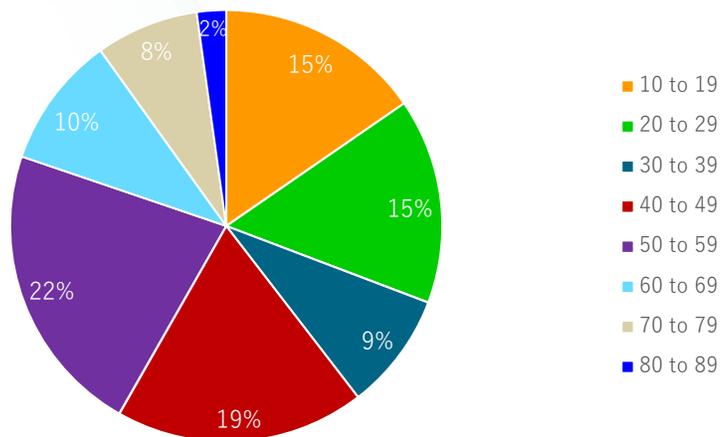
**15 %**

*Source: 2016 Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (SAIPE)*





## Bicyclist Deaths by Age

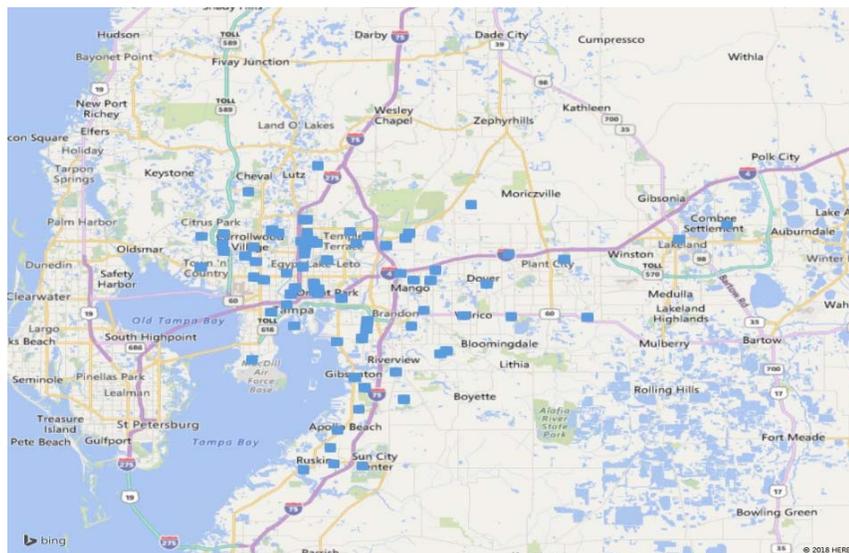


### Bicycle Fatality Crash Location

Hillsborough  
County, FL

January 2009  
Through  
June 2018

94 total fatalities

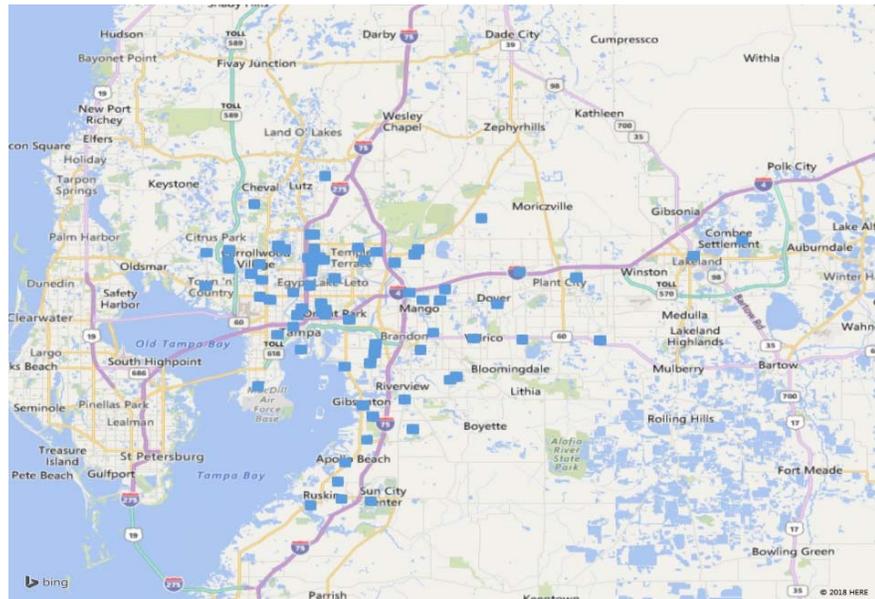


**Location of  
Bicyclist Fatality  
Residence**

**Hillsborough  
County, FL**

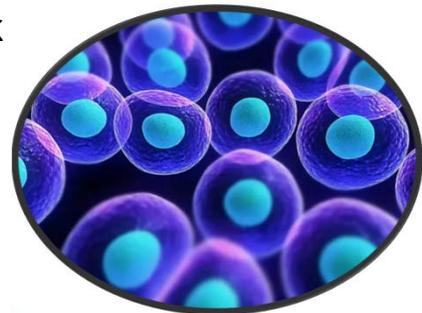
**January 2009  
through  
June 2018**

**94 total fatalities**



## A Closer Look

- Transportation research is diverse in many ways, but has only begun to look at language (Mangusin, 2017).
- Language is taken for granted, but is more important than it seems.



## Language in News Reports

PUBLIC SAFETY



**Tampa bicyclist, 52, dies after being rear-ended by vehicle; no charges**

Times staff

Published: December 15, 2017

Updated: December 15, 2017 at 07:17 PM

*Media language influences public understanding of bicyclist fatalities (Hojman et al., 2005).*

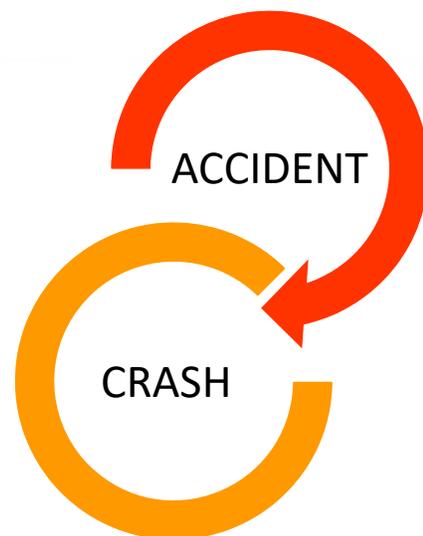


## Language Matters

“Language, they believe, shapes policy. The word ‘accident,’ they say, presupposes a conclusion that no one bears responsibility” – Transportation Alternatives, 2015

... the words “crash” and “collision” ignore the laws of physics” (Magusin, 2017)

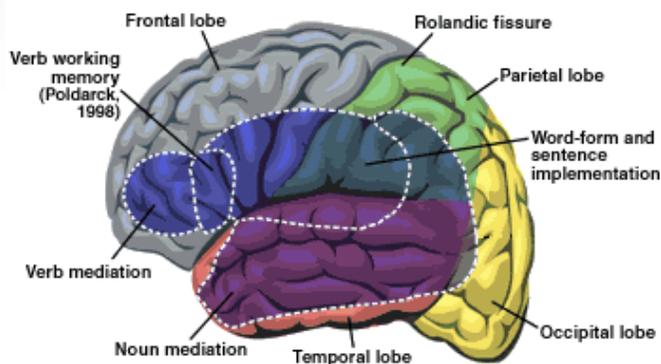
... the use of the word “accident” was no different from the use of the word “crash” and that microscopic language choices such as these do not impact reality (Badger, 2015)



## Critical Discourse Analysis – Purpose

Language shapes our perceptions of reality

The Organization of the Human Brain for Language



Source: Damasio and Damasio, 1993



## Critical Discourse Analysis as Method

Classification schemes

Ideologically contested words

Active vs. passive sentences

Agency

Nominalizations



## Framing & Bicyclist Identities

A frame is a representation of a topic or subject matter. Can represent:

- Types of people (e.g., bicyclists)
- Inanimate objects (e.g., vehicles)
- Processes (e.g., dying)
- Abstract concepts (e.g., economy)



## Episodic Framing (Iyengar, 1991)

- Brief of “the facts”
- Isolates the story and characters from larger context
- Used to report specific events and concrete circumstances
- Invokes individual rather than societal attributions of responsibility



LOCAL

### Bicyclist killed in crash in Tampa

Author: 10News Staff, WTSP  
Published: 11:17 PM EDT August 24, 2017  
Updated: 11:17 PM EDT August 24, 2017

A bicyclist was killed in a crash with a vehicle late Thursday, Tampa police said.

The crash happened at Lois Avenue N. and La Salle Street West. The bicyclist has died, police said.

Traffic on Lois Avenue between Lemon Street and Cypress Street will be closed during the investigation. Drivers are urged to use alternate routes.

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## Thematic Framing

- Larger structural and cultural issues
- Draws attention to society's role or policy issues
- Studies show that individuals rely on contextual cues to reason through issues; particular attributions depend on whether news is presented episodically or thematically (Iyengar, 1991).

### NEWS ROUNDUP

## Collins' death shows dangers of biking on city streets

By Keith Morelli | Tribune Staff

Published: July 30, 2010

Updated: March 21, 2013 at 10:45 AM

TAMPA - The death of LeRoy Collins Jr. this week in South Tampa illuminates the dangers faced by bicyclists on city streets where, every hundred feet or so, there are intersections clogged with two-ton vehicles turning, speeding through yellow lights and stopping short in crosswalks, biking advocates say. National bicycling safety figures note that some 70 percent of bicycle accidents happen at intersections or driveways. Collins, who lived on Davis Islands, was making the fairly short



## Hidden Power

Hidden power is exercised through “taken-for-granted” language uses and universal “common sense” practices.

### FAIRCLOUGH:

- Written language has a nuanced quality
- One-sided communication (news)
- Discourse as a site of ideological struggle
- Text interpretation: the interpretation of an interpretation



## Data Collection

### DATABASE SEARCH

- *Tampa Bay Times*, the *Tampa Tribune*, the *St. Petersburg Times*, WSTP 10 News, Bay News 9, Fox 13 Tampa Bay, WUSF Public Media, ABC Action News, and other news outlets appearing in print and online
- 190 news reports of 94 bicyclist fatalities

### TERMS

- (bike OR bicycle OR bicyclist OR crash OR collision OR struck OR killed OR dead OR death OR dies OR died OR fatal OR fatality OR accident) AND Tampa or Hillsborough County AND ("Name of Bicyclist")



## Coding and Analysis

### EXPERIENTIAL

- Vocabulary
- Grammar

### EXPRESSIVE

- Producer of texts' content, particularly the evaluation of subjects, identities, and outcomes



## Experiential and Expressive Nodes (Fairclough, 1989)

EXPERIENTIAL NODES					
CLASSIFICATION/VOCABULARY					
Bicyclist		Event		Motorist	
"Bicyclist"	"Person"	"Accident"	"Hit and Run"	"Car"	Specific Make
"Boy"	"Teenager"	"Collision"	"Incident"	"Driver"	"Teenager"
"Child"	Specific Name	"Crash"	"Killed"	"Man"	"Truck"
"Girl"	"Victim"	"Death"	"Struck"	"Motorist"	"Vehicle"
"Kid"	"Woman"	"Fatality"	"Wreck"	"Person"	"Woman"
"Man"		"Hit"		Specific Name	
GRAMMAR					
Agency		Nominalizations		Passive Sentence Structure	
Bicyclist Agency	Bicyclist No Agency				
Motorist Agency	Motorist No Agency				
EXPRESSIVE NODES					
EPISODIC ARTICLES					
General Outcomes		Outcomes for Bicyclist		Outcomes for Motorist	
Effect on Traffic	Public Safety	Charity	Others' Grief	Charges	Injuries
		Memorials		Emotions	
Safety		Social Identity			
Bicyclist Safety	Motorist Safety	Bicyclist		Motorist	
General Safety		Age	Gender	Age	Gender
		Class	No Pronoun	Class	No Pronoun
THEMATIC ARTICLES (Open Coding)					



## Results

### Taken-for-Granted Vocabulary

- **ACCIDENT:** the word "accident" was used to represent bicyclist fatalities 62 times in 48 articles.
- **INCIDENT:** the word "incident" was used 13 times in 12 articles.
- **CRASH:** the word "crash" was used 168 times in 91 articles.
- **COLLISION:** the word "collision" was used 26 times in 22 articles.



## “Accident”

### Word Choice:

Accident  
 Crash  
 Collision  
 Death  
 Event  
 Fatality  
 Hit and Run  
 Incident

A man wearing dark clothing and riding a bicycle was killed when he was hit by a car early Sunday on Hillsborough Avenue. The **accident** happened about 5 a.m. at the intersection with Lois Avenue. Jerome Thomas, 44, was riding a bike north, across Hillsborough Avenue, about 300 feet west of the intersection, when he was hit by a car in the eastbound lanes, according to Tampa police. Thomas died at the scene. The car's driver, Lorenzo Rodriguez, 57, was not issued any traffic citations, police said (*Tampa Bay Times*, 2014).

### IT WAS AN \*ACCIDENT\*

"An 'accident' is, by definition, unintentional," writes Emily Badger in a 2015 *Washington Post* article. She says that the word "accident" presupposes a conclusion that no one bears responsibility. This suggestion that nobody is to blame for the bicyclist's death is strengthened when the article ends by reporting that the driver was not cited for the traffic event.



## Grammar and Agency

**Agency is conscious action by a clear actor. It is communicated in language through grammatical structure.**

### Passive Sentences and Nominalizations

**Motorist Agency:** In 55 of 189 sources, the motorist was replaced at least once with the word “truck” (usually multiple times within a source), totaling 111 references to the vehicle as an agent in bicyclists’ deaths.

- Omit motorist name
- Obscure presence of driver
- Emphasize activity of motor vehicle
- Use inanimate nouns instead of driver names

*Boger was standing with his bicycle on the corner of Waters Avenue and Florida Mining Boulevard at 2:14 p.m. when a Mack truck made a sharp right turn and hit Boger, deputies said.*



## Passive Sentences

### Active:

The subject performs the actions denoted by the verbs "wearing" and "riding."

### Passive:

The subject is acted upon by the verb "hit."

A man wearing dark clothing and riding a bicycle was killed when he was hit by a car early Sunday on Hillsborough Avenue. The accident happened about 5 a.m. at the intersection with Lois Avenue. Jerome Thomas, 44, was riding a bike north, across Hillsborough Avenue, about 300 feet west of the intersection, when he was hit by a car in the eastbound lanes, according to Tampa police. Thomas died at the scene. The car's driver, Lorenzo Rodriguez, 57, was not issued any traffic citations, police said (Tampa Bay Times, 2014).



## Bicyclist Class vs. Bicyclist Safety

A relationship exists between unsafe bicycling behaviors and lower-class identity markers, while an inverse relationship exists between safe bicycling behaviors and higher-class identity markers.

- *Weeks, riding against traffic, was on his way home from a landscaping job.*
- *Police said Gutierrez was riding north against a red light at Woodland Corporate Blvd., in front of the Waterford at Cypress Lakes apartment complex, where he lives.*
- *At the time of the crash, Ishizuka had lights on her bike, wore a helmet and rode in the bike lane, Coleman said.*



## News as Narrative

- The Story
  - Newsworthiness
  - Balance



## Elements of the Story

- Schemata
  - Hit-and-run
- Social Identities
  - Bicyclist
  - Demographics
- Scripts
  - Police Reports
  - Laws



## Recommendations

- Active sentences
- Appropriate vocabulary
- Thematic frames
- Nominalizations



## Opportunities for Thematic Framing

**A significant portion of the dataset are written with thematic frames (56 of 189), suggesting that bicyclist fatalities happen for reasons that can be prevented.**

- Social Capital
- Safety Education
- Bicyclist Advocacy



## Social Capital

Both the below examples illustrate social capital via family networks and the deep-seated grief that is suffered by real people when bicyclists die and leave beloved kin behind.

- *Bryan's mother said the family was close. The boys shared a bunk bed. Bryan had the top where a big stuffed green frog remains, along with an open book: 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Donté listed his brother's favorite things: basketball and the colors red, blue and black. What did he like most? "Me," Donté said.*
- *Each Friday morning, at the exact minute her bicyclist sister Diane was hit and killed on a Tampa sidewalk, JoAnn Vega stands at the street corner and rings three cowbells. Her sister loved the Rays...Tuesdays, instead of meeting her daughter Diane for their once-weekly lunches, Amelia Vega visits the corner to tidy the memorial. She rearranges the candles and brings fresh flowers.*



## Safety Education

*"But also the need for riders and drivers to understand the rules of Florida roads. Under state law, bicycles are considered vehicles and have the same rights as motorists", said Tim Bustos, executive director of the Florida Bicycle Association.*

*Bicycling safety advocate Alan Snel said motorists and bicyclists must learn to properly share the road. "And bicyclists need reflective clothing and lights on both wheels when riding in the dark. Light yourself up like a Christmas tree," Snel said.*

*"The solution is not just to try and rid the roads of bicyclists and put them on a trail," she said. "A bicycle is a vehicle." (Gena Torres, Hillsborough County MPO)*



## Bicyclist Advocacy

*The bikes are personal memorials honoring the dead, but they're also symbols, part of an international movement aimed at reminding motorists to watch out for bicyclists.*

**ADVOCACY**

*Bicyclists are a common sight along the stretch of road. Bicycle safety advocates already were planning a 15-mile bike ride Friday to honor five bicyclists killed in about two months. They said people need to speak up to politicians about the need to improve bicycle safety. About 60 people attended the Honor the Fallen Bike Ride, which traveled into downtown Tampa and Ybor City before returning to Seminole Heights.*



## Linguistic strategies for reporting bicyclist deaths

Reframe the bicyclist to shift from blaming the individual toward a focus on social action and policy reform

More thematic frames to humanize bicyclists and contextualize traffic events in law, infrastructures, attitudes, environments, etc.

Active versus passive constructions to clarify agency and responsibility



## Future Research

- Investigate why certain bicyclist fatality cases are not covered by the media.
- Comparative research, specifically looking at coverage of bicyclist fatalities in other geographic locations.
- Comparative research, examining differences in urban environments, infrastructure and law enforcement policies.
- Examine other sources of texts such as police report forms and written legislation.



## Thank You!



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