Title

Shared Responsibility for Road Safety in Safe Systems Context

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/02t3v0x5

Authors

Fortin, Garrett

McMillan, Tracy

Grembek, Offer

et al.

Publication Date

2018-09-01

Berkeley SafeTREC

Shared Responsibility for Road Safety in Safe Systems Context

Garrett Fortin, Tracy McMillan, Offer Grembek, Jill Cooper
September 2018

Safe Systems is an approach to road safety that envisions the elimination of fatal and serious injuries and seeks to provide both a theoretical framework and practical roadmap for accomplishing such an ambitious goal. The Safe Systems approach involves a paradigm shift from traditional approaches to road safety planning and responsibility. This fact sheet discusses a principle integral to a Safe Systems Approach, shared responsibility for road safety.

	Current Practice	Safe Systems Approach
Who is responsible for road safety?	Road users are responsible for road safety and collisions occur due to their errors	Transportation professionals and policymakers share responsibility for road safety and collisions, along with road users

Current Practices

Current practice places much of the responsibility for road safety on road users, whether drivers, cyclists, or pedestrians. When a collision occurs, there is an attempt to determine the behavior of road users that led to the collision and an identification of which vehicle code violations occurred, if any.

Current practice may underestimate the fact that road users are subject to human error and vulnerability. People also make errors in judgment and do not drive perfectly, so they cannot completely prevent fatal and severe injuries when they are exposed to the risk of such a collision. Humans have a limited physical ability to withstand collision forces, particularly more vulnerable road users such as cyclists and pedestrians (OECD, 27). The responsibility to plan for mistakes and design roadways that make human errors survivable is in the hands of policy makers, transportation professionals, and many other contributors to the road system.

Safe Systems Approach

In the Safe Systems approach, responsibility for road safety is shared among many stakeholders. In addition to road users, other contributors to roadway conditions and to the transportation system are also responsible for the safety of the road and events that occur on it, including planners, engineers, law enforcement, policy makers, and private firms. This is based on the idea that road users have a limited ability to avoid all fatal and severe injury collisions (RAND, 7). Infrastructure, both as it has been designed and as it has been built and maintained, has an impact on how safe a particular piece of the road system is. Similarly, policies such as speed limits can have safety consequences in both specific areas and across the entire system.

Photo credit: Miha Tomunta

A walk assessment debrief among stakeholders in Eureka, CA.

There is discussion about which stakeholders are included in this idea of shared responsibility. One resource summarizes the group of stakeholders as "...those who plan, design, build, manage and use roads and vehicles and provide post-crash care..." (Austroads, 3). Transportation professionals and Emergency Medical Technician personnel are important parts of this group, as are local policymakers. But state and federal officials have leadership and policy-making roles and a higher-profile platform to communicate commitment to a Safe Systems approach. Finally, vehicle companies share responsibility to improve safety, which can encourage investment in technology, while insurance companies have a responsibility to promote safety via their incentive power (RAND, 45-49).

Of all the aspects of a Safe Systems approach, this acceptance of shared responsibility is perhaps the greatest challenge. Recognizing the complex influences on road safety and sharing responsibility among many stakeholders is instrumental to eliminating fatal and severe injury collisions.

Photo credit: Ana Lopez

A multisectoral and multidisciplinary roundtable dialogue about potential improvements in the City of Bakersfield.

Photo credit: Ana Lopez

Los Angeles Metro, LA County Department of Public Works, LA County Department of Public Health and community members gathered before a bike assessment.

Photo credit: Ana Lopez

Los Angeles Metro representatives talking to community members about upcoming projects.

An important component of this element of the Safe Systems Approach is how to implement road safety efforts into a system of shared responsibility - both via "top-down" policy leadership and "bottom-up" public demand. Vision Zero efforts in the US have worked to build shared responsibility by forming city-level coalitions. These coalitions combine community advocates and city staff from various agencies in safety improvement efforts. Such approaches work together to engage communities while providing expertise and leadership from the city.

It will require the cooperation of the entire range of road safety stakeholders to create a Safe Systems environment that eliminates fatal and severe injury collisions. Adopting a mindset of shared responsibility for collisions will help encourage these groups to work together to achieve this goal.

Works Cited

- The Road to Zero: A Vision for Achieving Zero Roadway Deaths by 2050. National Safety Council and the RAND Corporation, 2018.
- Towards Safe System Infrastructure: A Compendium of Current Knowledge. Austroads 2018.
- Zero Road Deaths and Serious Injuries: Leading a Paradigm Shift to a Safe System. International Transport Forum (OECD), 2016.