

Blaming The Victim

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Picture this: A pedestrian is standing on the curb, waiting for the light to change. The light changes, and the pedestrian steps out into the crosswalk and begins crossing the street. Before the pedestrian can reach the other side, a motorist runs the red light and hits the pedestrian. The pedestrian survives, but has sustained some injuries, and is transported to the hospital.

Police report that the pedestrian had been walking "too fast," and hit the car.

The media dutifully reports this fact. Outraged by this incident, an op-ed column suggests that "the only solution" to this problem is to require pedestrians to be licensed and insured.

Does that sound far-fetched? Of course it does. That would never happen.

But suppose that, instead of a pedestrian, we are talking about a collision between a motorist and a cyclist. Does that sound so far-fetched now?

Unfortunately, no—and it does happen.

For examples, consider two recent collisions. On August 8, a news story [reported on a collision](#) in Kelowna, BC. According to police, a cyclist traveling in the bicycle lane "hit" an SUV as the driver was making a turn. The media dutifully reported that the cyclist suffered "non-life threatening injuries after riding her bicycle into an SUV."

It was a classic right hook—the cyclist was riding lawfully, and the driver turned across the cyclist's path. Eyewitnesses reported that the cyclist was "traveling too fast in the bike lane and almost hit another car before she struck the Black SUV that was turning right." In other words, another driver nearly struck a lawfully riding cyclist, before she was right-hooked.

Oh, but wait—she was "traveling too fast." Or not. Unless the witnesses are saying that she was violating the speed limit—a circumstance that is highly unlikely—she wasn't "traveling too fast." She has a lawful right to travel on the road at the lawful speed of other traffic. But that reference to speed does tell us something—if the SUV driver who right hooked her even noticed the cyclist, then "traveling too fast" probably means that the driver underestimated the cyclist's speed and turned across her path.

That wasn't the only recent incident in which lawfully-riding cyclists were blamed for collisions with drivers who break the law. In Portland, Oregon, former NFL quarterback [Joey Harrington](#) was hit from behind while riding his bike. [The driver was cited](#) for "following too close."

And then an outraged reader wrote a [Guest Op-Ed](#) for the local paper. "In

light of Joey Harrington's recent accident, I think the time has come to resolve a worsening problem in the Portland metro area," the op-ed began. Ah, a call for safety. And yes, the concerned reader was calling for more safety on the road—by requiring cyclists to be licensed and insured.

Get it? A driver breaks the law, injuring a law-abiding cyclist, and the "worsening problem"—as evidenced by the collision that injured Joey Harrington—that needs to be addressed is "that many Portland cyclists take no responsibility." And according to this writer's analysis, "There is only one solution"—crack down on cyclists. Round up the usual suspects.

That skewed perception of reality—a reality that is apparent right in front of their unseeing eyes—is the underlying basis for how too many people process information. No matter how egregious the driver's actions, observers are sure that the law-abiding cyclist was in the wrong. Regardless of the facts, observers can be counted on to remember that some other cyclist somewhere broke a law.

And thus, by this skewed perception of reality under girding faulty logic, the motorist is always right, the cyclist is always wrong, and the victim always gets the blame.