

# History of Traffic Safety Paradigms in the United States

To understand why Vision Zero represents an improved path forward in traffic safety, it is helpful to learn more about where the United States (U.S.) comes from based on traffic safety approaches, which have included the “Es approach” as well as other others. According to Norton (2015), the evolution of traffic safety in the U.S. can be broadly grouped into four time periods, representing different prevailing “paradigms”

**1900s-1920s:** A **Safety First** paradigm. Cars are introduced and drivers bear the responsibility for road users’ safety. Walking and other travel modes are predominant, and the blame of a vehicle-pedestrian crash is placed on the driver.

**1920s-1960s:** A **Control** paradigm emerges, focused on preventing crashes using the “Three Es”—engineering, education, and enforcement. Under this paradigm, the primary offenders were reckless or careless drivers, “jaywalkers”, and poorly designed roads. Highways were built, and speed was considered safe under the right conditions. Pedestrians were instructed that streets were meant for cars.

**1960s-1980s:** As the number of crash-related deaths exceeded 50,000 in the mid-1960s, a **Crashworthiness** paradigm emerged. Stakeholders called for improved vehicle crashworthiness, asserting that the “Three Es” were not enough. Seatbelts and airbags were introduced, and vehicle design was a principal traffic safety consideration.

**1980s-present:** The **Responsibility** paradigm overlaid the previous paradigm. This represented a course correction from a strong focus on vehicle design to a revived emphasis on driver responsibility. Public health-informed behavior changes and traffic calming measures to improve drivers’ attention and reduce speeds were promoted. Over time, the “Es approach” transformed and adapted to shifting

cultural realities, often leading to an expansion to the Es list (e.g., evaluation, equity).



The concept of **equity** refers to equitable access to employment, goods, and services. It also means equitable involvement and power in decision-making processes. Equity represents a goal that transcends Vision Zero and should be considered and applied across goals and objectives in a community’s Vision Zero Plan. Safe Systems and Vision Zero represent a new traffic safety paradigm. Bridging the current Responsibility paradigm to this new paradigm will require at least three re-orientations to how traffic safety is defined and practiced.

- First, safety stakeholders must learn to recognize the complex nature of serious crashes.
- Second, they must develop the capacity to see the main interacting dynamics that contribute to serious roadway injury.
- Finally, these stakeholders must align their work with professionals in myriad complementary sectors (e.g., affordable housing, poverty reduction, medical services, car manufacturing, addictions counseling, etc.) to shift injury-perpetuating dynamics toward ones that ensure safe, equitable access and mobility for all road users.