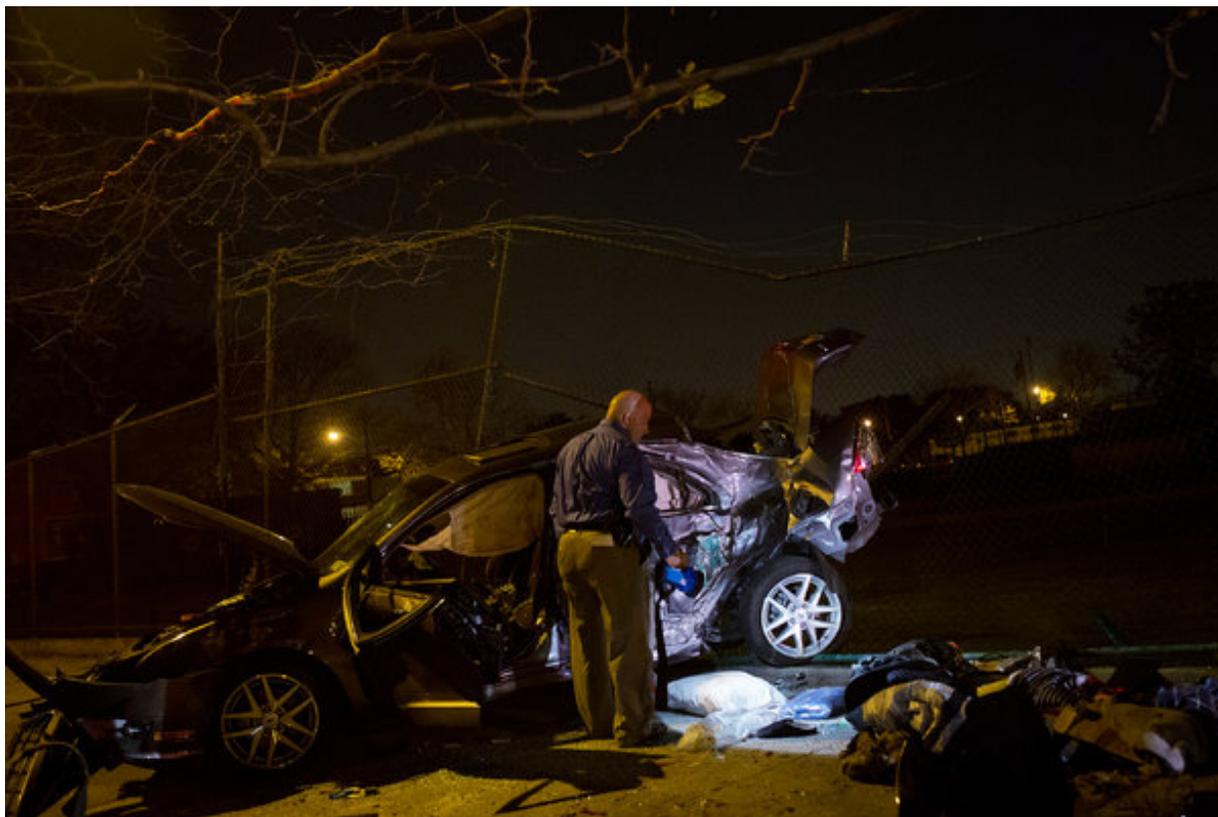


Police Unit Taking Closer Look at Deadly Crashes

By J. DAVID GOODMAN



Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Detective Robert Saporito of the Collision Investigation Squad surveying the wreckage of a car that jumped a curb and killed a woman.

The woman's body lay under a sheet on the darkened Brooklyn sidewalk, one all-white Adidas sneaker, one black sock. About 20 feet away, her other shoe mixed with the debris around a mangled Ford Fusion.

Minutes before, the car tore onto the sidewalk, striking the woman before slamming into a corner fence post, spinning airborne into a thick sycamore and finally coming to rest against the chain links of a local baseball field.

It was the second bloody scene of a recent Saturday midnight shift for Detective Robert Saporito of the Collision Investigation Squad. Both involved pedestrians. Only one survived.

"On the midnight, you get a lot of speed," Detective Saporito said. "A lot of death."

For thousands of New York City detectives, violence is usually synonymous with crime. But for the two dozen tasked with investigating the city's serious traffic crashes, the first question at any roped-off crime scene is determining whether a crime has taken place.

With the murder rate at a historic low, the Police Department has quietly moved to examine more of these crashes, focusing new attention and resources on another manner of violent death in the streets — the

victims walking, riding bicycles or in a vehicle.

The specialized squad came under the department's scrutiny last year, and some feared that its work would be curtailed. Instead, it has been bolstered with more detectives, high-tech mapping tools and a new mandate to investigate roughly three times as many crashes this year as last.

"When the city was focused on crime, this wasn't a priority," said Inspector Paul Ciorra, the head of the Highway Patrol division, which oversees the collision squad. "This is a high priority now."

The tens of thousands of people riding on Citi Bikes have only heightened the potential need for detectives trained in analyzing complex crash scenes.

"For big cities, they're on the leading edge of the curve," said Roy E. Lucke, a retired Chicago-area traffic officer and the director of transportation safety programs at Northwestern University. Most cities think of traffic deaths as somehow less worthy of investigation, he said. "Our mantra has always been, 'Tell me how they're less dead,'" he said.

And unlike violent crime, which afflicts certain areas of the city more than others, deadly car crashes tear across the broad spectrum of neighborhood, wealth and class. Many create headlines: a hit-and-run in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that killed a man, a pregnant woman and, a day later, their prematurely delivered son; a 6-year-old boy run over on his way to school in East Harlem. In the first, detectives caught the driver, Julio Acevedo, after he fled, charging him with manslaughter; in the second, the police issued summonses but filed no criminal charges.

Until recently, the Collision Investigation Squad — whose members readily rattle off physics equations and discuss throw weights and friction coefficients like an odd hybrid of Sherlock Holmes and Bill Nye the Science Guy — was called only to fatal crashes or those in which emergency room doctors deemed a victim likely to die.

The policy created difficulties in some recent cases — eight in 2011, according to Inspector Ciorra — in which a person survived for a time but died days later. By the time detectives returned to the scene, video images had been taped over, skid marks washed away, crash debris scattered.

The squad's policy was the subject of [a City Council hearing](#) in February 2012 and a [federal lawsuit](#) filed last June over the death of a pedestrian, Clara Heyworth, who was struck by a vehicle on a Brooklyn street in 2011. She died from her injuries a day after the crash, and the investigation into her death did not begin until days later. The suit alleges a "systematic failure" by the Police Department to investigate serious crashes.

Amid [the criticism](#), the department took a hard look at the unit and, this year, revamped its approach and its policy. Now, whenever a paramedic lists a patient as critical, Collision Investigation Squad detectives respond.

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The city’s prosecutors welcomed the change, which they said had already generated more cases. “It’s been needed,” said Gayle Dampf, the head of vehicular crimes for the Brooklyn district attorney’s office. “It definitely helps the prosecutor’s case.”

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The changes were reflected in [the new title](#) of the unit, for decades known as the Accident Investigation Squad and renamed this year.

“Everybody calls it an accident,” said Officer Matthew Center, a technician trained to use new robotic surveying equipment to map crash scenes. “But you find out that there may be criminality involved.”



A police officer using an electronic mapping system, called a total workstation, during the investigation of an accident in Brooklyn.

At

the Queens Highway Patrol command off the Grand Central Parkway, the painted door at the end of the first-floor hall still bears the old name, but the new approach was apparent among the four-man overnight staff: Detective Saporito, his sergeant based on Staten Island, and two officers from the Collision Technician Group — a newly formed, 12-person crime scene unit for traffic accidents.

The first call came in just after midnight.

Detective Saporito, wearing slacks and a Jets T-shirt, had been discussing a formula — “If it’s a skid, it’s the square root of 30 df” — when two words leapt from the crackling radio in the cramped detective room: “A.I.S. requested.”

The detective stopped midsentence to listen. “Hit and run, please advise, hit and run,” the dispatcher relayed.

Detective Saporito changed in the back of the room, the same space — now cramped with desks — where his father, a mounted police officer in the 1970s, once fit a horse for a friend’s send-off party.

Now in a blue shirt and tie, he raced in an unmarked Chevy sport utility vehicle — lights flashing, siren whooping intermittently — to the southern edge of Prospect Park, where a 24-year-old man, hanging out with his girlfriend, had been hit while crossing from a Wendy’s. The driver fled; the victim was taken to Kings County Hospital Center in critical condition.

It was the sort of episode that detectives are increasingly called to investigate. And, in this case, at least one crime was clear: leaving the scene.

Two small pools of blood marked the spot on Flatbush Avenue where the man came to rest. Napkins from the fast-food restaurant stuck to the pavement, near a spreading field of plastic debris.

“He blew out one of his headlight covers,” Detective Saporito said, shining light on reflective orange pieces among the larger bits of black plastic. “A ped struck, you have this. It’s not a lot to go on.”

He conferred with his supervisor, Sgt. Edward Flaherty, as an officer mapped contours of the scene, the shape of the debris field and the blood stain. Once the job of two officers equipped with a tape measure, a pencil and a clipboard, now one officer carries a computerized staff, topped by a geodic orange prism, that sends readings back to a motorized Leica device. The data are used to create a more precise map that can help reconstruct the crash.

The location of the shattered plastic — a good distance from the crosswalk — provided a key clue to Detective Saporito. “He’s going outside the crosswalk when he gets tagged,” he said.

Finding the driver in a hit-and-run case can be a daunting task. The ubiquity of cameras on storefronts — such as this Wendy’s — means the squad has a good record in such cases. But more than half of the drivers still evade capture.

The random nature of traffic crashes adds to the difficulty of investigations. “These accidents out here, it’s not two drug dealers on a corner that shot each other,” Inspector Ciorra said, sitting at his desk that had a copy of “Atlas Shrugged” by Ayn Rand, a bottle of Purell hand sanitizer and pictures of his children.

“Almost every time here, it’s regular folk; it’s Mr. Jones who had maybe one too many beers, hit someone and fled the scene,” he said. “That guy is not from the area. There’s nothing to bring him back, no nexus.”

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Not every traffic crash leads to criminal charges, which can be hard to explain to a family that has lost a loved one, detectives in the unit said. It has fueled complaints by pedestrians and cycling advocates, who accuse the police of failing to charge drivers in devastating accidents.

Inspector Ciorra, who starts every shift by reading [Streetsblog](#), a Web site often critical of the department, pays attention to the complaints.

“Our goal in every one of these cases is to put someone in cuffs,” he said. But without an underlying crime — like drunken driving or leaving the scene — detectives have difficulty establishing the probable cause needed to inspect the car’s black box, where information about the driver’s behavior is stored. Speed alone is not enough, he said.

Detectives want to get information from the box in every crash, he said, and a small lime-green reader can extract data on things like speed, seat belt use, braking and steering. But only in about 40 percent of cases will the device work with a given car’s computer system, often because the manufacturer will not allow access to the data.

“That’s where these guys don’t understand,” Inspector Ciorra said of the squad’s critics.

After speaking with a manager at the Wendy’s, who promised to preserve video from a camera near the accident site, another call came in just after 2 a.m. The dispatcher said the pedestrian did not survive.

“I’m going 98 from Flatbush,” Detective Saporito said as he headed to the next scene: Shore Parkway and Bragg Street, near Floyd Bennett Field and Knapp Street Bagels, a deli where police officers often stop for lunch.

A woman’s body lay on Bragg Street, the smashed Ford Fusion a dozen paces down on a Shore Parkway service road.

“Hit the tree,” Sergeant Flaherty told Detective Saporito, as they stood near the wreck.

“Oh, he definitely hit the tree,” the detective responded. Bits of bark were embedded in sharp metal folds by the rear door of the dark-colored 2012 sedan, now smashed into a curve that matched the old tree’s wide girth.

“He’s got a doughnut,” the sergeant added, looking at the right rear tire. “You’re not supposed to go more than 50 on the doughnut.”

More damning for the driver, Steven Calandrillo, 25, who was found unconscious and taken to nearby Lutheran Hospital, was what first responders said was the smell of alcohol on his breath. He was later charged with manslaughter, criminally negligent homicide, drunken driving and speeding.

The police found a passport on the woman and later identified her as Karin Eberts-Ayub, a 53-year-old who lived a few miles away in Gravesend. She had been standing on the sidewalk.

The circumstances of her death were despairingly familiar to Detective Saporito and Sergeant Flaherty, who have responded to as many as four such crashes across four boroughs during an eight-hour overnight shift.

Sergeant Flaherty used a cellphone found in the car to call the driver's mother and tell her about the crash, while Detective Saporito spoke on his phone with an officer at the hospital, who was securing a blood sample to be tested for alcohol.

"Call me back as soon as they get blood," he said. "I have the D.A. on standby."