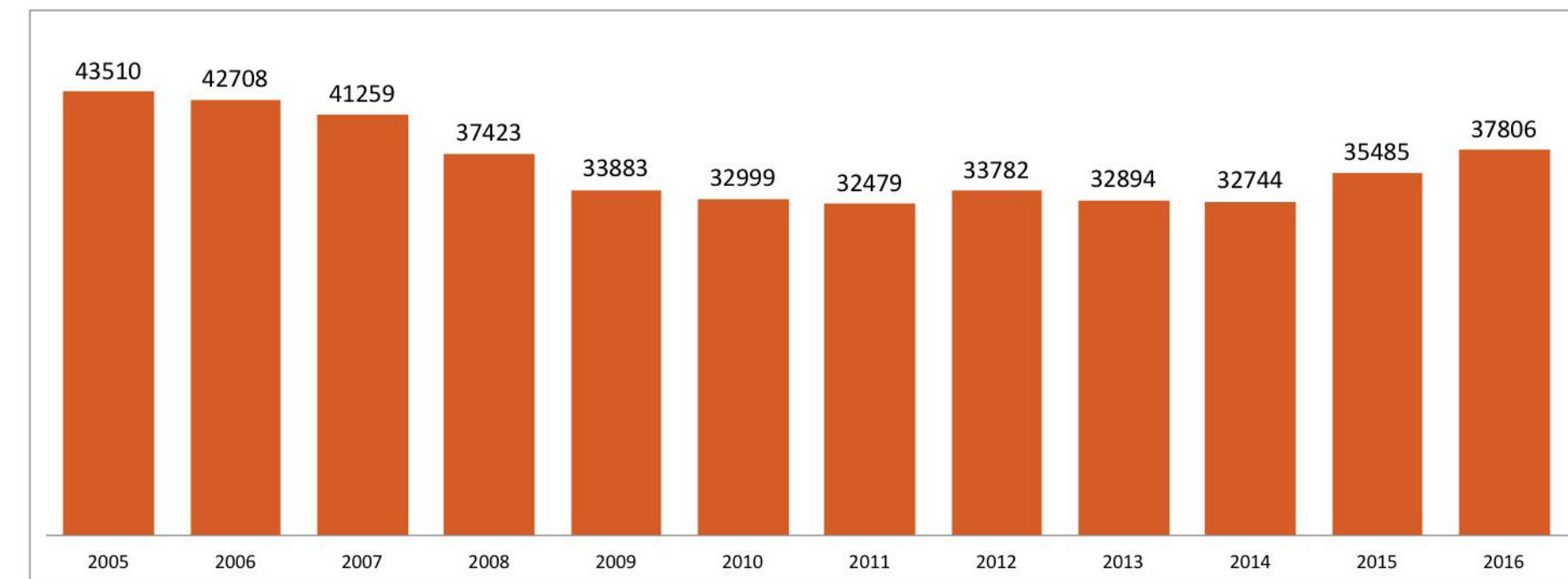# Traffic Safety Culture:
# A Primer for Traffic Safety Practitioners

INTRODUCTION

By themselves, traditional traffic safety strategies cannot achieve the target of zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries. Indeed, recent trends indicate increases in crash fatalities and fatal crash risk despite of these traditional traffic safety strategies (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF CRASH FATALITIES AND FATALITY RISK IN USA FROM 1994 TO 2016.

To achieve a target of zero traffic fatalities and serious injuries, we must shift the **CULTURE** of road users and traffic safety stakeholders. Such a shift requires a culture that believes that a target of zero is not only necessary, but it is possible – and recognizes that a safe system is achieved only from partnerships among all stakeholders (Figure 2).
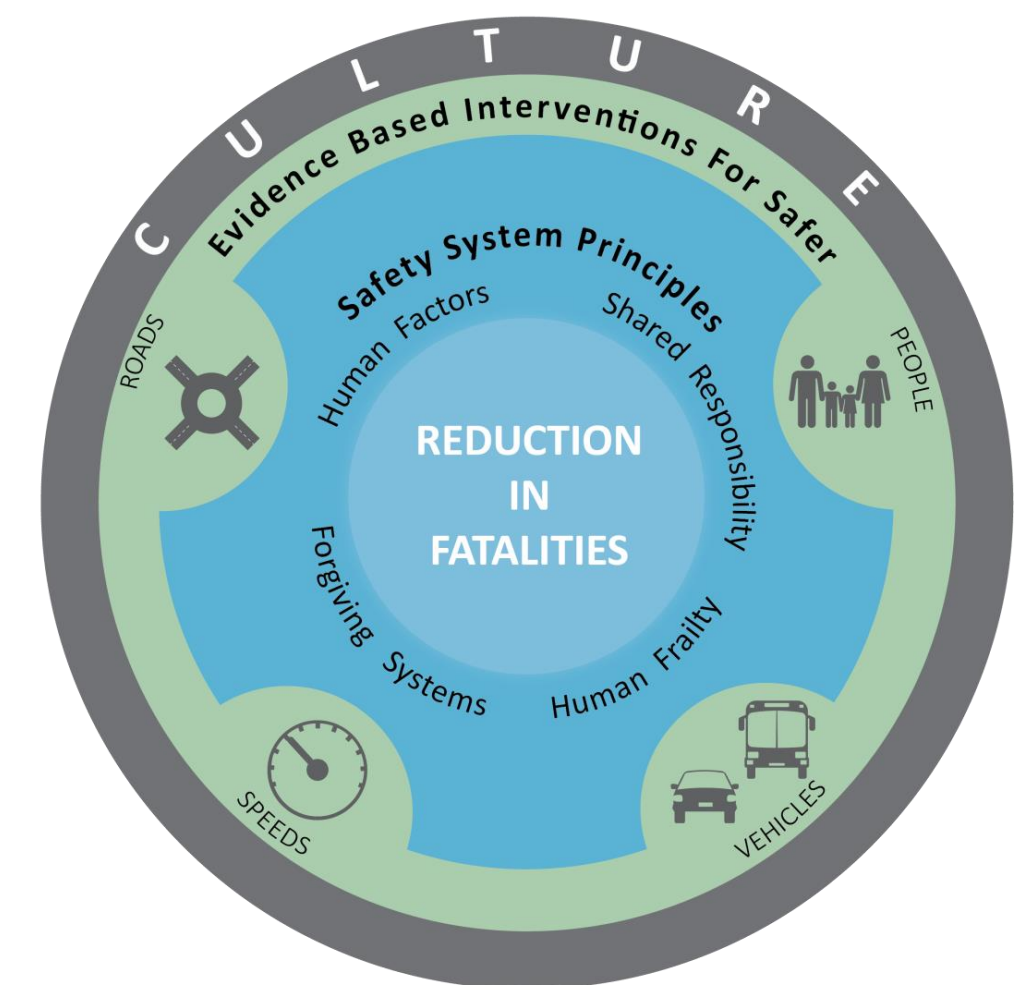
**FIGURE 2: ROLE OF CULTURE IN SAFE SYSTEMS APPROACH.**

WHAT IS CULTURE?

A zero deaths vision requires a change—a shift in culture both within transportation agencies and other organizations as well as within communities. Everyone must accept that fatalities are unacceptable and preventable. (https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/zerodeaths/)

But what do we mean by "culture"?

Our mind forms patterns of thoughts or "beliefs" every time we interact with someone or something. Beliefs help us interpret and understand the world, formulate goals, and make decisions. In this way, beliefs influence our choice of behavior.

Because humans are innately social, we establish relationships and interact with others in many ways throughout our lives. Some interactions are extensive – as with our family and friends. Other relationships are regular but may not be as intimate like those with our supervisors or colleagues at work. These nested layers of relationships form our social environment (Figure 3).
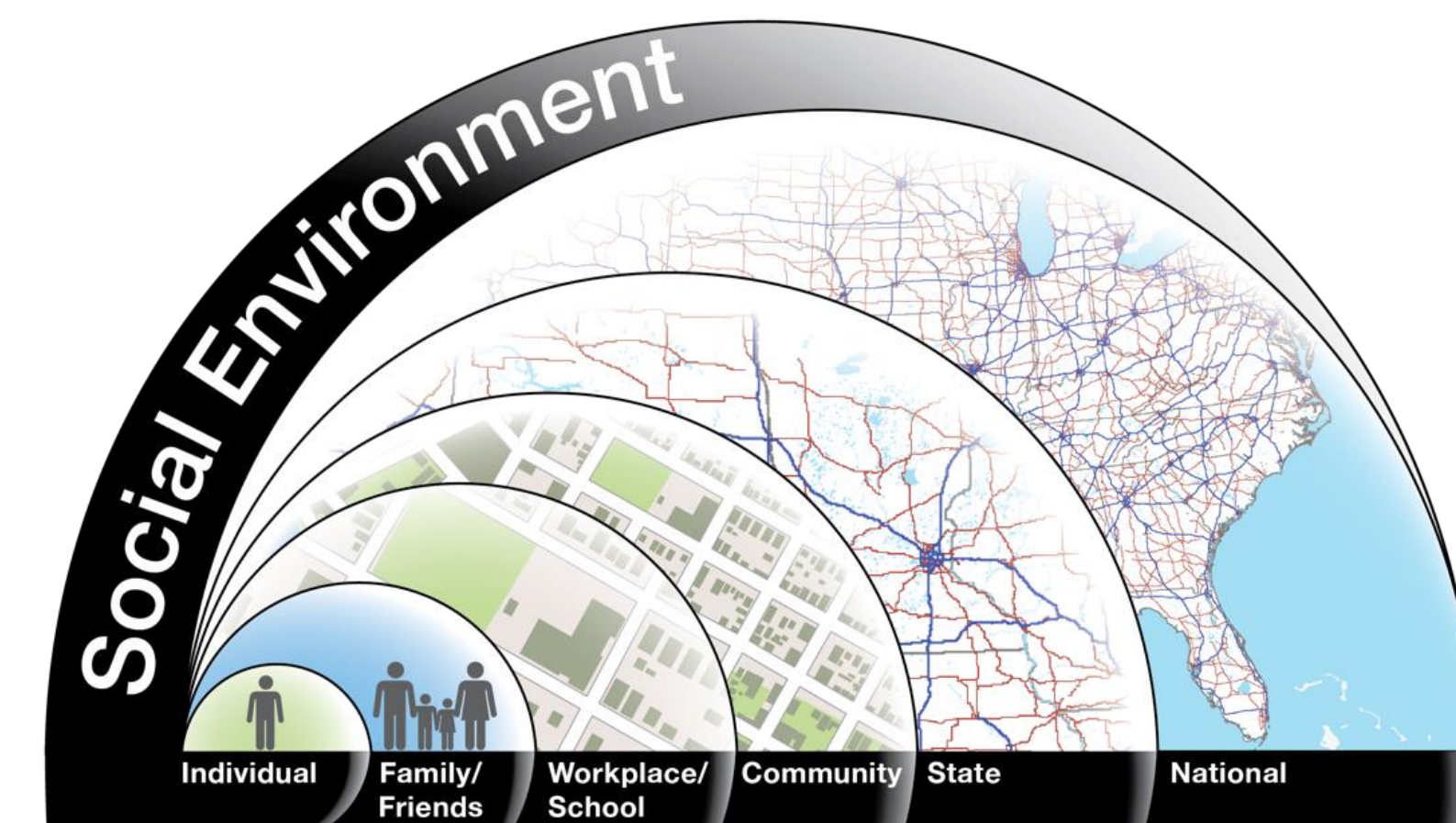
FIGURE 3: NESTED GROUPS THAT DEFINE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT.

Each layer of our social environment has the potential to influence our beliefs – and therefore – our behaviors. Sharing a group's belief system is necessary for identification and acceptance by that group. In this context, we can define culture as "the belief system shared within a defined group."

Thus, if we want to change a behavior within a group of road users, we need to identify and change the beliefs that influence the behavior. In other words, to change behavior, we need to understand and change the culture that is influencing that behavior.

WHAT IS TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE?

Having defined culture, we can now define **TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE** as: "the shared belief system of a group of people that influences road user behaviors and stakeholder actions that impact traffic safety."

In this definition, road users include all participants in the roadway transportation system. Road user behaviors include actions that increase or decrease crash risk and crash severity. Importantly, this definition also applies to actions taken by traditional and non-traditional traffic safety stakeholders.

Approaching traffic safety through the lens of traffic safety culture is different than traditional approaches to traffic safety (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE APPROACH.

1. By using a cultural lens to examine traffic safety, we recognize that traffic safety can be improved by growing beliefs that increase protective behaviors, not just decrease risky behaviors.
2. A positive traffic safety culture not only encourages road users to choose safe behaviors, it also encourages them to be proactive by supporting all traffic safety efforts and encouraging other road users to also behave safely.
3. A positive traffic safety culture also fosters the motivation and capability among traffic safety stakeholders to form effective partnerships, resulting in the integration of strategies to form a safe system.

IMPLEMENTATION

Improving traffic safety culture needs to be a stated goal in traffic safety plans. There are several benefits to making the improvement of traffic safety culture a strategic goal:

A. It creates the need to develop common language and a standard method of measurement for traffic safety culture.
B. It motivates the review of existing strategies to examine their potential effect on traffic safety culture.
C. It justifies the allocation of resources for new and innovative strategies to transform traffic safety culture.

The first step to including traffic safety culture in safety plans is to gain shared understanding about its importance to traffic safety goals. Such understanding can be achieved by open conversations. Below are examples of questions that can help engage those conversations:

- How are we being effective in reaching our traffic safety goals?

- What are some barriers to reaching our goals?

- How would we describe our community's traffic safety culture?

- How do we know we are accurately perceiving our community's traffic safety culture?

CONTACT INFORMATION

Nicholas J. Ward
Director, Center for Health and Safety Culture
Western Transportation Institute
Montana State University
nward@montana.edu
406-994-5942

For details and full reference list, see project URL:
https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety-primer.shtml

Montana STATE UNIVERSITY | Western Transportation Institute | Center for Health & Safety Culture