

The Role of Biomechanics in Reconstructing Pedestrian–Vehicle Collisions

Aisha Rahman*

Department of Forensic Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

DESCRIPTION

Pedestrian-vehicle collisions represent one of the most complex and challenging domains in forensic biomechanics. These events often involve multiple impact phases, varying speeds, diverse vehicle geometries, human body dynamics that are difficult to replicate. The forensic biomechanical perspective focuses on quantifying forces and motions during collision, identifying injury mechanisms, reconstructing accident circumstances with scientific precision. This discipline provides courts with essential evidence that can establish vehicle speed, direction of impact, even the position of the pedestrian at the moment of contact.

At the foundation of pedestrian-vehicle collision biomechanics lies the understanding of kinetic energy transfer. When a vehicle strikes a pedestrian, the initial contact typically occurs at the lower extremities, often between the bumper and the legs. This results in characteristic injuries such as tibial and fibular fractures, whose morphology provides information on the height of the bumper and the angle of impact. In some cases, fracture alignment can even suggest whether the pedestrian was standing upright, crossing obliquely, or bending forward at the time of collision. Biomechanical analysis therefore transforms fractures into physical evidence of the collision's mechanics.

Following the initial bumper impact, the pedestrian's body undergoes a complex motion sequence involving rotation, translation, secondary impacts. The torso may strike the hood, the head may collide with the windshield or roof edge, finally, the body may be projected onto the ground. Each of these contact events leaves behind biomechanical signatures in the form of fractures, lacerations, abrasions. By studying the distribution of injuries, forensic experts can reconstruct the order of impacts and determine whether the victim was struck from the front, rear, or side. This information not only clarifies accident dynamics but also helps verify or refute driver and eyewitness testimonies.

The height and shape of the vehicle front play a critical role in the biomechanics of collision. Passenger cars with lower bumpers tend to strike the legs first, resulting in forward rotation of the

body, while SUVs or trucks with higher front profiles often impact the pelvis or torso directly, producing different motion dynamics. Forensic biomechanical modeling accounts for these variations, enabling the reconstruction of injury mechanisms tailored to specific vehicle types. In legal contexts, this may prove essential in cases where the precise vehicle involved is disputed.

Head injury biomechanics in pedestrian collisions deserves particular attention, as traumatic brain injury is often the primary cause of death. When the pedestrian's head strikes the windshield or ground, linear and rotational accelerations are transmitted to the brain, producing concussions, contusions, or diffuse axonal injury. By analyzing fracture patterns of the skull and correlating them with known tolerance thresholds for head injury, forensic experts can estimate the velocity of impact. Modern finite element models of the human head allow simulations that predict brain tissue strain under different collision scenarios, adding quantitative rigor to forensic reconstructions.

Ground contact represents the final phase of pedestrian-vehicle collisions, often producing secondary injuries that complicate interpretation. Impact with asphalt may result in abrasions, lacerations, additional fractures distinct from those caused by vehicle contact. Forensic biomechanics distinguishes between primary vehicle-induced injuries and secondary ground-related trauma, ensuring that reconstructions remain accurate. This distinction is particularly important in cases where questions arise about whether the pedestrian was struck by a vehicle at all, or simply fell to the ground in a different context.

Experimental approaches play an important role in advancing pedestrian collision biomechanics. Anthropomorphic test devices (crash test dummies), post-mortem human surrogates, cadaveric studies provide empirical data on injury thresholds and kinematics. These findings are complemented by computational simulations, which can model variations in pedestrian size, posture, gait. Together, experimental and computational approaches create a robust foundation for forensic reconstructions, offering multiple pathways to verify conclusions.

Correspondence to: Aisha Rahman, Department of Forensic Sciences, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom, E-mail: aisha.rahman@forensic-bham.ac.uk

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The practical applications of pedestrian collision biomechanics extend beyond courtroom evidence. Insights from this field contribute to vehicle safety design, such as energy-absorbing bumpers, pedestrian airbags, active braking systems aimed at reducing fatality rates. Forensic casework benefits in turn, as newer vehicles produce distinctive injury patterns that can be traced back to specific safety features. This evolving interplay between engineering and biomechanics enriches both prevention and post-accident analysis.

The future of pedestrian collision biomechanics lies in integrating artificial intelligence with injury databases. Machine learning algorithms trained on thousands of real-world cases may soon predict injury outcomes with remarkable accuracy, providing forensic experts with additional tools for fast and precise analysis. The use of high-speed video footage from traffic cameras combined with biomechanical simulation may also allow near-real-time reconstructions of accidents, offering unprecedented clarity in legal proceedings.