

★ ★ ★ ★ Safety Culture

Introduction

Traffic crashes are the number one killer of children, adolescents, and young adults in the United States, accounting for more years of potential life lost before age 80 than all other sources of unintentional injury combined. In the last decade, the number of Americans injured in crashes added up to more than the combined resident populations of twenty states. In September 2001, motor vehicle crashes killed more Americans than the terrorists did on September 11th. And, while our government tells us that our roads are safer than ever -- and in many ways they are -- the cold hard fact that seems to escape our collective consciousness is that year after year, about 43,000 people lose their lives on America's roads -- one every 13 minutes!

Meanwhile, experts have suggested that we could cut this toll in half or better if only we would implement a few proven lifesaving countermeasures that we already know about. So why don't we?

The preponderance of evidence suggests that as a whole, Americans are simply too complacent about traffic safety, and are willing to accept the toll of traffic crashes -- estimated at over \$230 billion annually -- as the price of our mobility. While we were once the safest country with respect to standard measures of traffic risk, we now lag far behind most of Western Europe and Australia. While many other countries have cut their traffic-related death tolls dramatically over the years, ours reached an all-time low 15 years ago in 1992 and has been *increasing* virtually ever since.

Today, more and more motorists, confronted with the demands of fast-paced multi-tasking lifestyles, seem willing to ignore their once-undisputed civic duty to obey the law and, for example, stop completely at red lights or comply with the speed limit. Motorists do not seem to truly recognize the real risks associated with various behaviors, such as driving while talking on a cell phone or text messaging.

We need to change how our society thinks about safety and we need to foster a stronger safety culture. A "traffic safety culture" is not merely a culture in which people drive safely, highway authorities build safe roads, automakers build safe cars, and legislators pass effective safety laws. A safety culture entails a network of interdependent relationships in which all members value safety, do their part, and seriously engage in public dialogue to demand that all of the other members do their parts as well.

Car crashes rank among the leading causes of death in the United States.



Proposal

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety proposes to create a Center of Excellence in Safety Culture to 'lead the way' with a core research mission of measuring and evaluating attitudes and behaviors, and using that information to develop tools and strategies for use by stakeholders and partners that will change attitudes and behaviors and ultimately prevent crashes, injuries, and deaths on our roads. For the first time, multi-disciplinary research will be applied to the overarching issues and problems facing traffic safety. In the process, strategies will be deployed to actively engage the public, motivate sustained focus by decision-makers, overcome resistance to safety measures that are known to work, and increase local, state and federal funding for traffic safety research and implementing proven countermeasures. The integrated factors involved in human decision-making, risk acceptance and behavior will be defined, examined, and evaluated. Once completed, the Foundation will have scientifically valid findings and strategies that can be used by stakeholders and partners to improve the traffic safety culture in their communities and thus bring about real change.

The Foundation has already taken important steps towards enhancing the traffic safety culture in the U.S. To ignite national dialogue, and to strategically plan its future work, the Foundation developed *Safety Culture in the United States: The Journey Forward*. This groundbreaking report includes over twenty papers written by top experts in diverse fields including transportation, public health, public policy, psychology, and several others, addressing what safety culture is -- and more importantly -- what needs to be done to improve it. The publication continues to resonate with the traffic safety community for its unique and timely contributions, thus establishing the Foundation's leadership role on the issue, and providing the basis for the core activities proposed here.

To attack this vital issue, the Foundation has completed an initial round of public surveys to assess the public's knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to traffic safety -- or in short, the traffic safety culture. Already a long-established practice in Europe, Australia, and Canada, these initial surveys will provide a first glimpse into the safety culture in the United States, from which the Foundation can then evaluate and measure changes. Ultimately, this information will ignite action, including targeted information dissemination, outreach, and specific education activities to effectively reinforce positive trends and reverse negative trends, to foster the growth of a culture that demands traffic safety.

Core Activities

The Center will expand and refine its survey program, to gain a more comprehensive appreciation of the current traffic safety culture, and, more importantly, what can be done about it. This will involve studying not only individual attitudes and behaviors at the national level, but also how they may vary at regional or local levels, and across cultural populations. Moreover, an expanded survey program will enable the Center to drill down on significant national issues such as speeding, drinking and driving, and distracted driving, in greater depth than is feasible in a broader survey that intends to assess safety culture at a higher level. Digging deeper into specific issue areas would require targeted and specific survey instrument development and application.

Building on information gleaned from the Center's public surveys and other research, the ultimate goal is to develop a "Safety Culture Index". Roughly analogous to the Consumer Price Index, the Safety Culture Index will provide a tool to benchmark and measure changes in safety culture of road users across states, over time, and relative to other countries. Such an index will comprise a variety of indicators related to people's attitudes toward traffic safety problems, support for solutions, civic engagement in public debate, other socio-economic factors, as well as actual driving behaviors. This project is highly scalable, can provide state and local regulators with measurement data to advocate for change, engages media, and significantly leverages existing data collection efforts already underway.

The Center's safety culture research initiative will also include the organizational "cultures" of the public agencies that are responsible for influencing traffic safety. To motivate improvement in the safety cultures of stakeholder groups, the Center will develop a standardized means to assess or "audit" the organizational cultures of public agencies, such as Departments of Transportation, or state legislatures, as they relate to the influence that these organizations can and do exert on traffic safety in their jurisdictions. Once developed, the "audit" measurement instrument could be used by a stakeholder to assess its own or others' safety culture. In turn, the general public would see great benefit from comparative measures of agencies, for example, tasked with traffic safety in their own states and/or communities.

Strategic Communications and Public Education

Ultimately, the goal of the Foundation and our focused work on safety culture is to ignite social change that prevents crashes and saves lives. The initial and foundational work described above positions the Foundation as the leader on "safety culture." However, to truly have an impact, we must translate research results into the real world through innovative educational strategies supported by research.

Thus, beyond the structural work described already that, for the first time, clarifies the existing safety culture and highlights at-risk constituencies, the Center plans to develop and deploy strategies to inform stakeholders and partners on development of campaigns that truly change how our society thinks about and values safety and, most importantly, how they behave. Functionally, the Center will develop a 'toolkit' to grow 'safety culture', including survey results that identify constituent groups in need of intervention, measurement tools such as indices and audits to evaluate the existing safety culture in a community or agency, and proven intervention strategies based on pilot programs and 'best practices' for educating and communicating on traffic safety. With stakeholder groups building on Center-developed strategies, the resulting robust programs of education and outreach will have an impact on society at large.

To amplify the important results gleaned from the research projects underpinning this Center of Excellence, outputs in the form of implementable strategic community interventions and public education campaigns will be designed. Prevailing circumstances at the time of research completion will ultimately define the type and scope of outreach. Illustrative examples of projects shared with stakeholders may include:

- Survey findings that clearly chart the existing and changing 'state of the nation' when it comes to attitudes, awareness and behavior relative to traffic safety and safety culture
- Safety Culture Indices with opportunity for regular updating to show progress.
- Organizational 'culture' audits that assess existing safety culture landscape and provide guidance for promulgating change.
- Strategic design of research-based campaign(s) targeting high risk groups, identified through data acquired through survey programs, with known and effective countermeasures, through both "old" and "new" media.
- Development of community intervention materials to educate stakeholders on effective countermeasures to improve traffic safety.

'State of the art' marketing and communications strategies will be applied as "best practices" on an ongoing basis for the Center, and will include vital fundamentals such as release of regular press releases when research milestones occur, development and distribution of radio PSA scripts to enhance awareness of Center issues and impact on society at large, website development and content management, as well as site optimization for increasing traffic and visit duration and deployment of a strategic web marketing campaign to drive traffic to the website. The media will be engaged through regular updates of an online media resource 'kit', and ongoing outreach to media will extend the reach and impact of all research projects. Sophisticated and unique message development will leverage research findings to enhance impact in the real world.

Outputs, Measurement and Evaluation

The Center identifies its highest priority as designing and completing research that creates meaningful change in road users, both at the individual and societal levels. Strategically, the Center is positioned to do just this, and outcomes and outputs will be tools and concepts, based on solid research, that stakeholders and partner organizations will use to affirmatively impact their audiences – that is, the general public.

Based on available funding for the Center, it is anticipated that the bulk of the research and expected results and outcomes will occur within 3 to 4 years. Thus, in the first year of operation, the Center would administer an appropriate survey instrument for general use to a statistically representative sample of the U.S. population to measure attitudes and behaviors, with available results reported out on a quarterly basis. Additional surveys targeting attitudes and behaviors on more specific issues such as speeding, drinking and driving, and distracted driving, would be completed in the second year. Following the completion of each of the general and specific surveys, annual surveys would be completed to track changes in attitudes and behaviors.

Consistent with expectations and progress as noted above, the Center proposes development and completion of a Safety Culture Index by the third year of operation. Development and release of an organizational audit would be completed by year four. Pilot programs to support development of intervention strategies and deployment at community level through stakeholders and partners would begin in year three, and a 'toolkit' for broader dissemination and use, including a research-based communications/outreach plan would be in place by year four.

Measurable goals will include completion of projects on proposed timeline, and dissemination and use through and by stakeholders and partners of the Safety Culture Index, 'organizational audit', and developed materials to inform and direct educational and communication campaigns. Functionally, after release of the 'toolkit' in year four (approximately), the operational functions of the Center will include annual surveys focused on measuring changes in attitude, awareness and behavior in targeted audiences to evaluate continuing trends, and thus will evaluate the effectiveness of designed intervention messages and methods.