Values and Motivations of Young Drivers: Key Components of Impaired Driving Countermeasures

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ABSTRACT

Impaired driving among young drivers has been reduced significantly in recent years. Evaluations indicate that strategies based on deterrence and limiting availability of alcohol have contributed to this reduction. There will be a limit, however, to the extent that deterrence can be strengthened and availability limited. Hence, strategies based on positive motivations have the potential to further reduce impaired driving.

The current project was designed to identify ways in which the strongly held values of young drivers may be used to motivate them to avoid impaired driving voluntarily, without the threat of punishment. The project used in-depth one-on-one discussions and focus groups to identify values and motivations that exert influence on the behavior of young drivers and to suggest countermeasure concepts based on these values and motivations. Discussions were carried out with 276 respondents, 18- to 29-years-old. Twelve focus groups were then carried out to discuss the themes identified in the one-on-one discussions and to provide further details about the attitudes and behaviors of target group.

The analysis revealed the most consistent values and motivations of the groups as a whole and ways in which the values differed among different subgroups. Analyses also examined many other parts of the respondents’ lifestyle, social life, drinking habits and driving habits. This paper will discuss the countermeasure concepts based on study findings.

INTRODUCTION

Impaired driving among young drivers has been reduced significantly in recent years (Stewart and Voas, 1993). Evaluations indicate that strategies based on deterrence and limiting availability of alcohol have contributed to this reduction. Much more remains to be done to broaden the reach of these strategies and improve their implementation. There will be a limit, however, to the extent that deterrence can be strengthened and availability limited. Hence, strategies based on positive motivations have the potential to further reduce impaired driving.

The goal of the project described here, funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is to identify ways in which the strongly held values of young drivers may be used to motivate them to avoid impaired driving voluntarily, without the threat of punishment. Values may influence drivers in different ways. For example, a value placed on conviviality and conformity to peer behavior might encourage people to drink heavily in situations in which they must drive. By contrast, a value placed on acting responsibly and protecting others would encourage avoiding impaired driving. The project used in-depth one-on-one discussions and focus groups to identify values and motivations that exert
influence on the behavior of young drivers and to suggest countermeasure concepts based on these values and motivations.

Previous persuasion and education-based countermeasures have not been highly successful, unless combined with strong deterrence (Vingilis, 1990). The current project was designed to improve the chances of success for such countermeasures by increasing the available information about the values and motivations of young drivers. The nature of the data collection is described below.

ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSIONS

Discussions were carried out with 276 respondents, 18- to 29-years-old in three sites: Montgomery County, Maryland; Madison, Wisconsin; and Palo Alto, California. Respondents were recruited using random digit dialing and were invited to participate in the study if they reported that they were licensed drivers and that they drink alcohol at least once per month.

Following is a brief description of the sample:

- 136 males
  - 140 females
- Montgomery County -- 92
  - Madison -- 92
  - Palo Alto -- 92
- 18-20 years old -- 29
  - 21-24 years old -- 106
  - 25-29 years old -- 141

The respondents were largely middle class with white-collar jobs.

The discussions were carried out face-to-face by trained interviewers and were semi-structured. They were about one hour in duration and included questions about:

- Demographic information
- Drinking patterns
- Driving patterns
- Leisure activities
- Decision-making processes regarding drinking and drinking and driving
- Perception of peers’ drinking and drinking and driving
- Feelings about impaired driving
- Perception of peers’ feelings about impaired driving
- Perception of family’s feelings about impaired driving
- Experience with and perceptions of various impaired driving countermeasures
• Ambitions for the future
• Strongly held values regarding self
• Strongly held values regarding friends
• Strongly held values regarding future
• Recommendations for countermeasures

FOCUS GROUPS

Twelve focus groups were carried out to discuss the themes identified in the one-on-one discussions. The focus groups participants were men and women 21 to 29 years of age who said that they had driven within two hours of drinking some time in the last year. Most participants were drawn from among the one-on-one discussion sample. Four focus groups (two male, two female) were conducted in each of the three sites (Maryland, Wisconsin, and California).

The focus group discussions were semi-structured and designed to test some of the themes identified in the one-on-one discussion and to provide further details about the attitudes and behaviors of target group.

FINDINGS

Drinking Patterns and Attitudes Towards Alcohol

Women reported drinking a mean of eight drinks per week; men reported a mean of 11 drinks per week for men. The average number of drinks reported consumed at one time (on weekends) was three for women and four for men. Sixteen percent of men and eight percent of women reported usually having 5 or more drinks at one sitting. These drinking levels are somewhat contradictory to the apparent frequency of drinking to intoxication reported elsewhere in the discussions and focus groups.

Alcohol plays a very important role in the social lives of the young people in the sample. Favored leisure activities include sports and spending time with friends. Most respondents saw these activities as naturally including alcohol. Many respondents had difficulty even imagining leisure activities that would not include alcohol.

Most heavy drinking occurs with groups of friends, usually of the same sex, but occasionally mixed. Friends are an integral part of drinking and can be an influence either to drink more or to be responsible and look after each other.

The most typical setting is bars and clubs with occasional parties in private homes. Both men and women report less drinking on dates. Both sexes said that on dates they like to drink enough to feel more relaxed but were concerned that they not drink so much that they appear foolish or do something embarrassing. Women in particular seemed concerned about losing control or “doing something I wouldn’t normally do.” The problem of being sexually exploited while impaired by alcohol was mentioned by women.

Respondents mentioned pervasive social pressure to drink. In particular they described norms that exist in social settings that require all the members of a group to be “on the same
level” of intoxication. Respondents said that they sometimes feel uncomfortable when one member of the party is not drinking: they are concerned that the sober person is being judgmental about their behavior. This attitude poses particular problems when the group has a designated driver, as will be discussed below.

Attitudes Towards Impaired Driving

Members of the sample expressed very negative attitudes towards drunk driving. Even so about 60 percent of respondents admitted to, at least on occasion, driving after drinking enough to be legally impaired. When the respondents attitudes about impaired driving were probed further, they appeared to feel that driving while intoxicated occasionally is normative, whereas driving while intoxicated habitually is irresponsible. Their primary motivation for avoiding drinking and driving was fear of arrest.

Respondents reported paying attention to their companions’ impairment at the end of the evening. Women were more likely actually to ask each other, “Are you OK to drive?” Most female respondents reported that if their friends said they were capable of driving, companions would be reluctant to contradict them, even if impairment was apparent. Men reported being more confrontational and aggressive with friends who they thought were too impaired. They described physically taking the keys or even getting into fights.

Virtually all respondents reported frequently using designated drivers as a means of avoiding impaired driving. Frequently, the designated driver role is assigned very casually, and often the designated driver is simply the person deemed to be least drunk at the end of the evening. Even if the designated driver is chosen at the beginning of the evening, this person is expected to have at least a few drinks. Respondents reported that the designated driver is frequently pressured to drink.

Respondents reported very ambivalent attitudes about designated drivers. They sometimes used words like “party pooper,” “geeky” or “nerdy” to describe a designated driver. They did not enjoy being a designated driver and used the term “baby-sitter” to describe this role, saying that the designated driver had general responsibility for a group of drunken friends that extended beyond just driving. They also reported occasions when the designated driver became intoxicated. In fact, many of the instances in which the respondents reported driving after drinking too much occurred when the designated driver had become too drunk to drive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNTERMEASURES

Deterrence-based countermeasures are effective with this population. Their primary motivation for avoiding drinking and driving is fear of arrest. Persuasion-based countermeasures can be designed to incorporate our understanding of the attitudes and behavior of this population:

• Provide a positive image of avoiding drinking and driving, preventing others from drinking and driving, and being a designated driver;

• Emphasize that responsible driving should be a consistent behavior (that it is not only the habitual impaired driver who causes problems);
• Model skills that are needed to avoid drinking and driving (e.g., planning ahead, using designated drivers more appropriately);
• Emphasize the role of friends as taking responsibility for one another rather than as negative influences (i.e., to drink more).

REFERENCES

Stewart, K. and Voas, R., Decline in drinking and driving crashes, fatalities and injuries in the USA, in: The Nature of and the Reasons for the Worldwide Decline in Drinking and Driving, TRB Circular, in press.