Rating the States: An Activist Approach to DUI Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Since 1980 when MADD began, alcohol-related traffic deaths in the USA have declined an estimated 37 percent. Changes have been observed in public attitudes toward drinking and driving, as well as in programs and alcohol-related crashes. The activities of MADD and similar groups have been cited as among the key factors in those changes.

In pursuing its mission of fighting drunken driving and helping victims of DUI crashes, MADD developed a new program to identify the strengths and weaknesses in state laws and programs dealing with drunken driving. “Rating the States,” carried out in 1991 and 1993, provided a unique compilation of information about each state. The survey, developed by a special task force made up of MADD leaders, highway safety experts and state and federal government officials, was sent to each state’s governor’s highway safety representative.

State responses to the surveys were graded and the results compiled into a “report card” for each state as well as for the nation. Release of the report to the media and the public drew widespread attention and aided in achievement of legislative and programmatic progress in numerous states.

INTRODUCTION

In the past years, alcohol-related traffic deaths in the USA have fallen an estimated 37 percent. Public attitudes toward drinking and driving have changed measurably. (Gallup, 1993) Researchers have observed changes in programs and alcohol-related crashes and have noted several important factors in those changes. (Fell, 1994) One of the factors cited is the citizen activist movement, and the largest and most often recognized of these groups is Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

MADD is a non-profit organization formed in 1980 to fight drunken driving and help victims of alcohol-related traffic crashes. Polls over the years have shown that, increasingly, MADD is seen as the most effective organization of its type and is acknowledged as the most widely recognized group fighting drunk driving in the USA (Gallup, 1993). MADD has recently been recognized by the Chronicle of Philanthropy as America’s best-liked charity. (Stehle, 1994) To establish that record and level of influence in a relatively short time has required organization, activism, dedication, and a strong focus on identified goals and effective programs.
EFFECTIVE GOALS AND PROGRAMS

MADD's mission is to “to stop drunk driving and to support victims of this violent crime.” In pursuing its mission throughout its fifteen years, MADD has adopted specific public policy and legislative goals and has developed and promoted numerous programs. The group has been strongly identified with efforts to change legislation, but programs to educate the public about the hazards of impaired driving and to provide support to crash victims have been equally important. Support for vigorous enforcement led to close working relationships with law enforcement officials. The group has increasingly focused on programs which can save more lives from crash involvement, deaths and injuries. One important key is keeping the impaired driving issue before the public, and one of MADD's most effective programs in this regard has been “Rating the States.”

RATING THE STATES

Over the years MADD members have frequently been asked to identify the states with the best, or toughest, DUI laws and programs as well as those with the weakest legislation. An evaluation of this sort would be extremely difficult for government agencies to carry out because of political ramifications. In contrast, MADD had a national vantage point from which to collect and analyze the information needed for such an evaluation, while also having both the independence and moral authority to use the results to promote further progress in public policy. The Rating the States Program epitomized effective citizen activism in partnership with highway safety leaders. It has educated the public, focused attention on prevention of “drunk driving,” and successfully stirred legislators to action.

MADD first set out in 1990 to assess the status and progress of state and national efforts to reduce impaired driving, and to provide a baseline for measuring progress toward achieving MADD’s “20 By 2000” program. (“20 By 2000” was MADD’s challenge to the nation to reduce the proportion of alcohol involvement in traffic fatalities by 20 percent by the year 2000.)

To develop the “Rating the States” (RTS) survey, MADD worked with Advocates for Highway & Auto Safety as sponsors and a task force of highway safety experts. The task force was selected based on their involvement in public policy advocacy, legislative research, or highway safety program evaluation. MADD released the first “Rating the States” (RTS) assessment in 1991, followed by the second in November 1993. The following describes how the rating program was conducted, the rating methodology and, finally, the results.

RTS TASK FORCE

MADD and Advocates established a steering committee made up of members of their own organizations as well as experts in traffic safety invited from universities, research organizations and government agencies. This task force developed a questionnaire based on the elements of the “20 By 2000” plan plus additional issues deemed indicators of the status of a state’s highway safety program in the DUI area.
SURVEY DEVELOPMENT AND CONTENT

Ten program areas were addressed in the first survey; in the second, one of the ten was split, giving a total of eleven areas, including the following: Governor’s Leadership; Statistics and Records; Enforcement; Administrative & Criminal Sanctions; Regulatory Control and Availability; Legislation; Prevention/Public Awareness; Youth Issues; Self-Sufficiency Programs; Innovative Programs; and Victim Issues.

The questionnaire was mailed out to the state Governor’s Highway Safety Representative in each state and to a MADD leader. A letter and a copy of the 1991 report were sent to the Governor’s office to announce the 1993 survey. Response was requested by July 7, 1993, which unfortunately fell at a time when many states were faced with an August deadline for completing their three-year Highway Safety Plan for the U.S. Department of Transportation’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

In both the 1991 and 1993 surveys, states were challenged to provide a wide range of information, including some data not routinely collected by many states. As much data as possible was included in the questionnaire from sources such as NHTSA’s Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) and Digest of State Alcohol-Highway Safety Related Legislation, and the FBI Uniform Crime Reporting Section, which reported the estimated total of DUI arrests each year. States were asked to confirm or correct this data. The result is a unique compilation of data and information on state alcohol highway safety programs that exists nowhere else.

RATING SYSTEM AND EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

For the 1993 survey, considerable effort went into making responses quantifiable and objective. Data from the FARS, the FBI, and NHTSA’s Digest were again utilized and verified by the states. Responses to more open-ended questions were scored by the panel of task force experts.

Every effort was made to obtain information that was as complete as possible. Steps were also taken to assure that questions to which few states were able to respond did not unduly influence the overall outcome when other higher-priority criteria such as key legislation or countermeasures were met. Sections and questions within sections were weighted to reflect the priority given to proven laws, countermeasures and programs by highway safety experts and by MADD. Additional data were compiled for information only and were not reflected in the state-by-state grades.

The 1993 “Rating the States” Survey was revised significantly from the 1991 survey based on that initial experience and suggestions from those who participated in the prior survey, including members of governors’ staffs, the National Association of Governor’s Highway Safety Representatives (NAGHSR) and highway safety experts who have advised MADD and Advocates throughout this program. As a result of the information from these sources, many questions were clarified. Some questions which might have been of interest but could not be answered because of lack of information at the state level were deleted from the new survey or were included only for information but not rating purposes. An attempt was made to reduce the work required to answer the survey by providing data where available, requiring the respondent for the state only to determine the accuracy of the federal data.
Surveys were sent to the Governor’s Highway Safety Representative and state MADD leaders, who also reviewed the responses from the states. This review allowed them to seek additional information where questions had been inadvertently left unanswered or some important elements not fully presented.

Scoring of completed questionnaires was made as objective as possible by having the judges first review and weigh all questions in all sections of the survey prior to receiving the responses. The weight to be given to each section was determined as was the weight to be given to each item within each section. In addition, the panel reviewed every item and determined the answers which distinguished a strong response. In this way, an analysis plan was developed prior to receiving the responses themselves. Different responses to individual questions were coded in order to determine how many points they warranted. Questions that evoked a discrete number of different responses were evaluated by the expert panel before the survey was sent out in order to determine how many points would be given. Responses to open-ended questions were judged by the panel after the responses were received, using predetermined guidelines to make the criteria as objective as possible while still allowing for any unique or innovative information to be fairly evaluated.

For the few states that were unable to complete the survey, a system was developed awarding slightly less than the mean score, because missing information tended to be in areas of weakness for that state; awarding the nationwide average for the missing responses would have tended to inflate the state’s score.

In computing the overall grade, the state’s score for each section was combined, but with some sections weighted more heavily than others based on the panel’s predetermined weighting system. For instance, improvement in the alcohol-related fatality rate was judged to be an important measure of a state’s anti-drunk driving program and so was given greater weight.

The national report card scores were derived from the proportion of all questions in each section that were answered correctly by the states, augmented by information about federal legislative efforts and programs, national opinion polls, research and surveys and consensus reached by the task force of experts as well as a consideration of anecdotal evidence of change from the 1991 national report card status.

RESULTS

Based on all the factors indicated, the expert panel rated the overall national grade at a “B-.” For each state a “report card” was developed showing grades in each of eleven categories. Included was data about traffic fatalities and the estimated cost to that state due to alcohol-related traffic deaths and injuries, as well as the number of licensed drivers and vehicle miles traveled and the rate of alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 vehicle miles traveled.

PUBLICIZING THE RESULTS

In both 1991 and 1993, the results were released at a Washington, DC, news conference, drawing extensive media attention. The 1993 release was announced just before the Thanksgiving holiday, which ushers in the annual holiday season during which alcohol-
related traffic crashes typically increase; the new media were especially eager for stories on
the subject. Both video and audio releases were provided, along with press releases, and
many local MADD officials across the country held their own news conferences to
announce their state grades. Many of these events included state officials as well as MADD
and Advocates representatives.

Media interest was considerable, with total audience exposure to the story estimated at
62.5 million, counting both print and broadcast media. Television network news stations
carried stories as well as major national newspapers. Local stations produced their own
material in addition to the releases prepared by MADD.

RESPONSES

In states with relatively high grades, some MADD leaders expressed concern that the
positive coverage might reduce impetus for further progress, while in states with relatively
low grades, some expressed fear that the poor ratings might jeopardize working
relationships with state officials. Some officials were indeed dissatisfied, but in some
notable cases, the report more often led to renewed concern about the problem and
reinvigorated efforts to fight impaired driving.

SUMMARY

Despite the pressures of federal grant planning requirements, legislative sessions and
limitations of staffing and budgets, most state officials gave serious attention to this survey.
In part because of the stimulating results of these surveys, states have continued to make
progress in adopting and implementing new laws and programs, while looking for new
solutions to the DUI problem. The report can serve as a “road map” to states to guide state
and local efforts in the fight against drunk driving in future years.

MADD’s focus has substantially broadened from its early and singular “punish the drunk
drivers” theme. MADD continues to adhere as closely as possible to its primary anti-DUI
focus, believing that maintaining a more narrowly defined purpose -- fighting drunken
driving and aiding DUI crash victims -- continues to be the key to its success. However, an
increased emphasis has been given to prevention and general deterrence programs.
Maintaining visibility for the issue of drunken driving and drawing attention to limitations
as well as strengths of current drunken driving prevention efforts by means such as the
“Rating the States” program has proven valuable in this regard.

REFERENCES

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