Victim Impact Panels
Do They Impact Drinking And Driving Behavior?

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Abstract
Results of two randomized trials with Victim Impact Panels (VIPs) were compared. Trials have found that while there is considerable movement among intention and self-efficacy measures, Impact Panels have little effect on subsequent Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) arrest or drinking and driving behavior.

Introduction
Victim Impact Panels (VIP’s) have been instituted throughout the United States in hope of reducing DWI’s. VIP’s represent a considerable investment of resources for individuals associated with Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), for local justice systems (in many locales, first-time offenders are required to attend VIP sessions as part of their sentence), and for those attending the VIP.1 If effective, VIP’s could be a cost-effective means of further reducing DWI morbidity and mortality. If not, resources may be better utilized elsewhere.

Investigations of the effectiveness of MADD VIPs do not provide unequivocal evidence about the effects of VIP experiences on subsequent alcohol consumption, drinking and driving behavior or recidivism. MADD-sponsored studies have found that those who attended MADD VIP’s had a lower recidivism level than non-VIP participants. The Washington County, Oregon study found the recidivism rate of VIP participants was 8.8 percent, compared to a non-participant re-arrest rate of 40 to 45 percent.2 A similar study in Clackamas County, Oregon found that the re-arrest rate for VIP participants was one-third that of non-participants.3 One study found that those who did not attend a VIP were more than twice as likely, 18.7% as compared to 9.3%, to be re-arrested for DUI [Driving Under the Influence] during the 12 months following post-test data-collection.4 Fors and Rojek found that the 12-month re-arrest rate for 404 VIP participants in one Georgia county was 6 percent, compared to 15 percent for 431 DWI offenders who did not experience a VIP.5
Other investigations have not supported the effectiveness of VIPs as a DWI deterrence strategy. Shinar and Compton, for example, compared the recidivism rates obtained from driving records for several thousand DWI offenders in California and Oregon with (1) a comparison group matched on gender and age, and (2) a comparison group of DWI offenders sentenced to a VIP but who failed to attend. The results showed that the VIP experience had no measurable effect on recidivism. Additionally, a study which compared 3,517 DWI offenders who were sentenced to attend VIP’s with 1,721 DWI offenders who were not so sentenced in Bernalillo County, New Mexico found that a VIP referral did not increase re-arrest rates but lowered them marginally to not at all.

The above-mentioned studies have two major limitations. They employed either a panel survey design or a quasi-experimental design that lacked randomization of respondents to treatment or control. Thus they cannot to provide clear, unequivocal evidence as to the effectiveness of VIP programs.

Two controlled randomized field trials of the effectiveness of VIP’s have been conducted in two counties of New Mexico, USA, the MADD VIP Trial (MADD) and the Customized VIP Trial (Customized). Both trials involved court-defined first-time DWI offenders. Both trials analyzed traffic safety records two years following VIP condition. Measures of drinking and driving behavior for each trial were obtained from self-report data following VIP condition. There are a number of differences between the trials: sentencing of the offender; majority population; follow-up to panel presentation; length between and number of follow-up points.

**Methods**

The findings of two randomized trials of the effects of Victim Impact Panels on drinking and driving behavior were compared.

The population of the MADD VIP trial was predominately Hispanic (46%). Participants in the MADD trial were court-defined first-time DWI convicted from the Bernalillo County Metro Court in Albuquerque, New Mexico. MADD participants were randomly assigned following court sentencing for DWI to either a MADD VIP and DWI school group or a DWI school only group.

MADD participants were assessed at pretest, post-test, one year and two year follow-up time points. Their traffic safety records were obtained from the State of New Mexico for the two years following the VIP condition. Drinking and driving information was obtained at each follow-up point.

The Victim Impact Panels in this trial were presented in a large public hall. The audience ranged between 100 and 200 people, police officers patrolled the aisles. Audience members were asked to complete an evaluation form following the presentation.

Native Americans accounted for 60% of the population in the Customized VIP trial. Participants were inmates in a court-mandated 28-day DWI Detention/Treatment Program in San Juan County, New Mexico (SJCDWI). Participants were recruited upon their entrance into the 28-day
Program. They were randomly assigned to either the Program including VIP or program and no-VIP upon their entrance into the 28-day Program. Participants in the Customized trial were assessed on three occasions: intake, the day preceding their release and two month follow-up.

The Victim Impact Panels in the Customized trial were tailored to the audience with regard to ethnicity, language and lifestyle. The VIP’s were held in the courtroom where most of the offenders had been sentenced. The audience was primarily inmate offenders numbering between 30 and 40 individuals. Detention center guards were also present. Following the Panel, inmates were returned to their dorms where they participated in a discussion of how drinking and driving had affected their lives. Each inmate was required to fill out a workbook, which they later reviewed with their counselor.

Table 1: Demographics Study Participants

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<tr>
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<th>MADD Participants</th>
<th>Customized VIP Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n  %</td>
<td>n  %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>625 (75%)</td>
<td>66 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>208 (25%)</td>
<td>33 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>17 (2%)</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo</td>
<td>300 (36%)</td>
<td>29 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>383 (46%)</td>
<td>6 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>100 (12%)</td>
<td>59 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>34 (4%)</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tbody>
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Results
There was no significant difference in re-arrest or drinking and driving behaviors between those who attended and those who did not attend the VIPs in both trials.

The MADD trial found a non-significant trend in the direction of VIP subjects reporting more drinking and driving behavior at both one-year and two-year follow-ups. Re-arrest rates for DWI approached being significantly different across groups, with the mean for the VIP group (0.242) being approximately 30% higher than that for the DWI only group (.186), F(1,780)=3.60, p=.0583. 8

The Customized trial had similar findings. A 2x2 Chi square analysis was conducted with group assignment as one dimension (VIP, no-VIP) and subsequent DWI arrest for a two-year period after release from the Program on the second dimension (yes/no). Chi square was not
significant, $\chi^2(1) N=89, 1.40, p<.24$, indicating that there was no differential rate of recidivism based upon group assignment. Chi squares indicated no significant differences between the two groups with relation to drinking in the past 60 days (yes/no), driving after drinking in the past 60 days (yes/no), number of days with five or more drinks (yes/no), or driving after drinking five or more drinks (yes/no): Drinking in the past 60 days, $\Pi^2(1, N=81) = .020, p=ns$; driving after drinking, $\Pi^2(1, N=81) = .202, p=ns$; five or more drinks, $\Pi^2(1, N=81) = .073, p=ns$; driving after five or more drinks, $\Pi^2(1, N=81) = .171, p=ns$. 

**Discussion**

Results of the two randomized trials indicate that, regardless of the population, setting of the panel, sentencing of the offender, customizing of the panel or utilization of the panel in treatment, VIPs do not appear to produce a differential benefit with regard to recidivism or drinking and driving behavior of court-defined first-time DWI offenders.

VIPs are set up to appeal to the emotions of those in the audience. The overall intent of the VIP is to bring the offender face-to-face with the broad range of negative consequences that drinking and driving bring about. This type of emotional appeal does not appear to have a long-term effect on the larger issues of alcohol abuse and/or dependency, which are more likely to be the underlying reasons for drinking and driving. While they may prove to be beneficial to the panelists and the public at large may see them as a valuable educational tool, Victim Impact Panels do not appear to have a significant impact on drinking and driving.

**References**


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