Effectiveness of Mass Media Campaigns for Reducing Drinking and Driving and Alcohol-related Crashes

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This systematic review assesses the effectiveness of mass media campaigns for preventing alcohol-related crashes and alcohol-impaired driving. The review was conducted using the methodology developed for the Guide to Community Preventive Services. To qualify for the review, studies must have been published in English and met established quality criteria for study design and execution.

Eight of the ten studies identified by an extensive literature search met the quality criteria for inclusion. Three of these studies evaluated campaigns focused on increasing public awareness of local law enforcement activities and the legal consequences of drinking and driving. The remaining five studies evaluated campaigns that emphasized the social and health consequences of alcohol-impaired driving. The median decrease in crashes of all types (fatal, injury, and property damage) was 13% (interquartile range: -14%, -6%). The median decrease in the most commonly reported crash outcome, injury crashes, was 10% (interquartile range: -15%, -6). Cost-benefit analyses for two of the reviewed campaigns estimated societal benefits exceeded the costs of developing and airing the campaign messages by factors of 8 and 21.

The mass media campaigns evaluated in this review were carefully developed using practices that would be expected to maximize their effectiveness. These practices included pretesting of campaign messages and efforts to maximize the length and frequency of audience exposure. The studies reviewed represent a highly select sample of mass media campaigns targeting alcohol-impaired driving, and their results cannot be generalized beyond such high-quality, high-intensity campaigns. Also, most of these mass media campaigns took place in areas with high levels of other alcohol-impaired driving prevention activities, such as strong law enforcement. It is not known whether these campaigns might have had similar effects in a setting where strong alcohol-impaired driving prevention activities were not in place.

According to the Guide to Community Preventive Services’ rules of evidence, there is strong evidence that mass media campaigns that have similar characteristics to those in the studies reviewed are effective for reducing alcohol-impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes. Based on this evidence, the Task Force on Community Preventive Services—a 15-member, nonfederal group with expertise in public health policy, behavioral and social sciences—issued a recommendation for mass media campaigns that are carefully planned, well executed, attain adequate audience exposure, and are implemented in conjunction with other ongoing alcohol-impaired driving prevention activities.

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