Developments in Canadian community-based impaired driving initiatives: MADD Canada’s “Campaign 911”

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Abstract

Context
Despite numerous legislative amendments, countless awareness programs and similar initiatives, impairment-related crashes remain the leading criminal cause of death in Canada. The progress made from the early 1980s until the late 1990s has almost stopped. Among other problems, Canada’s charge rate for impaired driving offences per licensed driver is relatively low, constituting less than 42% of the American rate as of 2010.

Various programs have been undertaken in Canada and the United States to encourage the public to report suspected impaired drivers to the police. The elements of these programs have varied, few programs were assessed, and the collected data were incomplete. In 2007, MADD Canada launched its national “Campaign 911” to encourage the public to report suspected impaired drivers. MADD Canada is the country’s largest grassroots anti-impaired driving organization, giving its programs considerable reach.

Objectives
To review the pre-existing public mobilization programs, describe the key elements of MADD Canada’s Campaign 911 and assess its reported impact.

Key Outcome
The results of MADD Canada’s Campaign 911 have been promising. The reported benefits include: increased public perception of the risk of apprehension; increased public calls to the police regarding suspected impaired drivers; and increased police vehicle interceptions, provincial licence suspensions, federal impaired driving charges, and police follow-up with the owners of reported vehicles that were not intercepted (MADD Canada, 2012, slide 6).

Discussion and conclusions
The elements of Campaign 911 are consistent with the research on effective media, traffic safety and multi-component community campaigns (Babor et al, 2010, pp. 156-158, 200-202, 207-210; Elder et al, 2004; Phillips, Ulleberg & Vaa, 2011; Schults et al, 2009). Similarly, the focus on increasing police interception and charge rates is consistent with deterrence theory (Homel, 1993, p. 59; Nagin, 1998; Tay, 2005; Watson & Freeman, 2007). However, the specific features, intensity and duration of the individual campaigns vary, and data on these campaigns have not been collected on a consistent basis. Nevertheless, given the promising results to date, MADD Canada’s Campaign 911 warrants a systematic review.

Introduction

Campaign 911 is not novel, as the public has been reporting suspected impaired drivers since the establishment of the first police emergency call systems. Virtually all jurisdictions now have a single dedicated phone number, such as 911, to receive public calls for emergency services. Typically, the number is linked to a call centre that prioritizes the calls and, where appropriate, dispatches the police, fire department and/or emergency medical services. The
widespread use of cell phones has greatly increased the public’s capacity to report incidents in a timely manner.

Campaign 911 builds on this existing infrastructure. It seeks to increase awareness of the public’s role in detecting and apprehending suspects of impaired drivers, the appropriateness of calling 911 to report suspected impaired drivers, and the information that should be reported. In turn, these measures should increase the number of public calls, the relevance of the information reported, and the number of suspects intercepted and subjected to provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges. In addition to the immediate removal of impaired drivers from the roads, Campaign 911 seeks to deter impaired driving by increasing the perceived risk of apprehension.

The pre-existing American and Canadian programs

There have been several initiatives in the United States to encourage reporting suspected impaired drivers to the police. In 2007, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published a survey of these programs in 57 American states and territories. Of the 53 responding jurisdictions, 45 had a reporting program using the general emergency number, and six had a reporting program with a dedicated emergency number (Fiorentino, Cure, & Kipper, 2007, p. 2). In most cases, the public reports were directed to the appropriate police agency, regardless of whether the jurisdiction had a general emergency number or a dedicated number. Most of the jurisdictions simply noted that they had a reporting program and only answered a few additional questions, leaving the majority of the survey unanswered.

Nevertheless, there were some trends in the responses. Most jurisdictions promoted their programs using a combination of billboards, highway signs, patrol cars, television, and radio. The most common problems included: too few patrol cars to respond to calls; inadequate or incomplete information from callers; the time it took to find the reported vehicle; the lack of probable cause to stop the reported vehicle; and inappropriate calls. Only Colorado, Idaho and Washington reported evaluating their programs. However, the results of the evaluation were unknown in Colorado and dated in Idaho. Washington indicated that its program had resulted in an increase in arrests and a decrease in fatalities (Fiorentino, Cure, & Kipper, 2007, pp. 5-52).

The NHTSA study also sought detailed information on the impact of the specific programs, but again the data reported were very limited. For example, only seven jurisdictions provided information on three or more of the following questions, and only two jurisdictions provided information on all five questions (Fiorentino, Cure, & Kipper, 2007, pp. 53-62):

(i) How often is a patrol vehicle actually dispatched?
(ii) Average time between call and stoppage of vehicle?
(iii) Estimated percentage of calls resulting in arrest?
(iv) Estimated percentage of calls resulting in prosecution?
(v) Estimated percentage of calls resulting in conviction?

In Canada, programs encouraging the public to report impaired drivers are also popular. For example, a program called “Operation Lookout” began in the late 1980s and was sponsored by a series of Ontario community-based impaired driving groups. In 2006, the Ontario Community Council on Impaired Driving (OCCID), a charitable organization, assumed responsibility for Operation Lookout (Leonard, slide 3). The program components typically included road signs, billboards, PSAs, and ads in newspapers. The program provided
information on how to identify and report a suspected impaired driver (Purnell, 2008, p. 6). Operation Lookout has been run in approximately 50 Ontario cities, towns and counties, but as in the United States, little information is available on the features, intensity or duration of these initiatives.

Although OCCID suggests that Operation Lookout has had significant traffic safety benefits, little supporting evidence is provided (Leonard, slides 2 and 14). A presentation on the Belleville, Ontario area Operation Lookout program reported the number of provincial licence suspensions and impaired driving arrests from 2000 to 2005, but did not indicate if or how this information related to the program (Jianopoulos, 2008, slide 5). A 2007 Grey Bruce Health Unit press release stated that public calls to the police concerning suspected impaired drivers increased 71% after the 2000 launch of the local Operation Lookout program (Grey Bruce Health Unit, 2007). A 1995 Peel Regional Police report indicated that public calls reporting suspected impaired drivers increased by 70% and that impaired driving incidents had decreased by 36% following the 1992 introduction of Operation Lookout (Peel Regional Police, 1995, p. 5).

The authors have been unable to find any other information on whether the Operation Lookout programs increased the number of public calls to the police, police interceptions of suspected impaired drivers, provincial licence suspensions or criminal charges.

**MADD Canada’s Campaign 911**

Campaign 911 is a community partnership involving traffic safety organizations, the police, emergency call centres, public health units, insurance companies, municipalities, and the media. Campaigns have been initiated in communities in three provinces and one territory, and there are five province-wide Campaigns. In total, approximately 60 Campaign 911 programs, albeit sometimes using a different name, are currently operating in cities, towns and communities across Canada (Kelly, 2013, pp. 3-4).

MADD Canada has released a guide on establishing an effective Campaign 911 program. The guide addresses the need for the police and emergency call centres to coordinate their activities and provide sufficient resources for the anticipated increase in calls concerning suspected impaired drivers. It emphasizes engaging and educating the public to maximize the number of helpful calls and the importance of large, high-visibility roadside signs and ongoing media initiatives. The guide also includes: educational materials on 10 signs of impaired driving; instructions on how to call safely and the information to be conveyed; and sample road signs, billboards, promotional materials, and other resources (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 7-11).

The guide sets out the key responsibilities of the police and community partners. The police responsibilities include: responding to 911 calls and intercepting reported vehicles; issuing provincial licence suspensions, laying criminal charges and following up with the owners of reported vehicles that were not intercepted; and collecting related statistics (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 9-10). The community partners are expected to undertake media campaigns, raise funds for 911 billboards and road signs, and educate the public and encourage them to view impaired driving as an emergency that warrants calling 911.

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1 These include the “Call-911 Campaign,” the “Curb the Danger Program” and the “Report Impaired Drivers Program.”
Unlike the American study and Operation Lookout, there is considerable information on the impact of at least some of the Campaign 911 programs, including those in two of Canada’s largest municipalities. Moreover, most of the information is current to 2010 or 2011. However, there is only statistical information on nine of the programs, and the type of data reported varies. For example, in Saskatoon, Regina, Camrose, and Edmonton, the information is limited to the post-implementation period. In other cases, information is available on the number of pre and post-implementation calls, and the resulting police interceptions, provincial licence suspensions, criminal charges, and follow-up actions concerning vehicles that were not intercepted.

In the 12 months following the initiation of the program in Saskatoon (pop. 231,900) in 2010, the public made almost 3,000 calls to 911 concerning suspected impaired driving. The police intercepted 616 of the reported vehicles, and these police stops resulted in 240 provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges. The police also sent warning letters to the owners of 1,121 vehicles that had been reported but not intercepted (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 23-24).

Edmonton (pop. 730,000) initiated its Campaign 911 program in 2007. It generated 9,229 calls in 2010, which led to 3,392 vehicle interceptions, 1,174 provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges, and 1,192 follow-up letters to the owners of reported vehicles that were not intercepted (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 25-26). While calls (7,852), suspensions and criminal charges (969), and follow-up letters (584) declined in 2012 (Edmonton Police Service, 2013), the January to March 2013 statistics are somewhat more positive (Kelly, 2013, p. 5). In its first eight months beginning in October 2010, the Camrose (pop. 17,200) program received 192 calls, resulting in 101 vehicle interceptions, 34 provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges, and 23 follow-up letters (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 29-30).

Following the York Regional Municipality’s implementation of the program in 2006/07, the average annual number of 911 calls about suspected impaired driving and resulting criminal charges increased by 59% and 81%, respectively (MADD Canada, 2012, slides 19-20). In the year after the 2008/09 launch of Calgary’s program, 911 calls concerning impaired drivers and resulting criminal charges rose by 80% and 28%, respectively (MADD Canada, 2012, slide 22).

In Ottawa, 911 calls reporting suspected impaired drivers increased by 43% following the December 2009 implementation of the program (MADD Canada, 2012, slide 28). In Nanaimo, the 2009 launch of the program was credited with increasing 911 calls concerning suspected impaired driving by 110% and resulting provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges by 100% and 33%, respectively (Kelly, 2013, p. 2). In the year following the 2011 launch of the Brandon campaign, total calls (911 and general police number) concerning impaired driving suspects increased 47%, vehicle interceptions increased 79%, and provincial licence suspensions and criminal charges increased 48% (Kelly, 2013, pp. 10-11).

**Conclusion**

MADD Canada’s Campaign 911 is not novel, but it appears to be comprehensive, integrated and well resourced. It is currently operational in more and larger communities than Operation Lookout, which is mostly confined to Ontario. Campaign 911 is consistent with the research
on effective media, traffic safety and multi-component community campaigns. It stresses the importance of using high-visibility signs, undertaking ongoing intensive promotional activities, educating and mobilizing the public, establishing partnerships with senior police officials, and building broad community coalitions. In accordance with deterrence theory, Campaign 911 focuses on increasing the number of vehicle interceptions, provincial licence suspensions, impaired driving charges, and police follow-up contacts with the owners of reported vehicles that were not intercepted.

Following implementation of the Campaign 911 programs, the number of public calls regarding suspected impaired drivers sharply increased, as did the number of resulting vehicle interceptions, provincial licence suspensions, criminal charges, and police follow-up actions. The large highway signs and related promotional initiatives have likely increased public awareness of the impaired driving issue and the public’s perception of the risk of apprehension. Similarly, the increases in vehicle interceptions, provincial licence suspensions, criminal charges, and police warning letters have probably had a deterrent impact.

However, there is statistical information on only nine of the approximately 60 Campaign 911 programs and, of these, only five include pre and post-implementation data. Moreover, the statistics in these five campaigns have not been collected and reported in a consistent manner. As indicated, the programs are initiated on a local level, and there is little information on their specific features, intensity, costs, and duration. Most of the Campaign 911 programs are relatively new, and it cannot be assumed that their current impact will be sustained.

While the information on Campaign 911 is limited, the results to date have been promising. Consequently, in our view, MADD Canada’s Campaign 911 warrants a systematic review.

References


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