Increasing impaired-driving enforcement visibility

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Abstract

An effective way to reduce impaired driving is to increase the perceived risk of being stopped and arrested by law enforcement if driving while impaired. One of the most successful strategies for doing this is the coupling of intense and highly visible enforcement with publicity about the enforcement campaign. The term “high-visibility enforcement” (HVE) is used to describe law enforcement efforts aimed at deterring driving after drinking by increasing the public’s perception of being caught, arrested, and prosecuted for impaired driving. Examples of impaired-driving HVE programs are provided for regional, state, and local agencies considering incorporating HVE strategies into their efforts to curb impaired driving or to modify existing HVE programs. Six case studies of HVE programs currently operating in the United States provided the basis for these examples. HVE elements include the use of lighted or variable message signs; high-intensity lights; large signs announcing the enforcement; and large vans, trailers, patrol cars, and police officer vests with specialized impaired-driving enforcement insignias. Publicity activities include press releases, earned media coverage, letters to the editor, and signs, marques, posters, and billboards in the community publicizing the enforcement. Common enforcement strategies of HVE operations include sobriety checkpoints and saturation patrols. Checkpoints concentrate law enforcement officers at the roadside to identify impaired drivers passing through. Saturation patrols involve an increased number of officers patrolling a limited area where impaired driving is prevalent. Both use highly visible elements to heighten their overt impact. Enforcement efforts should also be supported by a substantial amount of publicity and communications. Publicity regarding the HVE operations raises public awareness and the perception of an increased likelihood of detection of impaired driving. Research has indicated that HVE operations that are well publicized, conducted frequently, and have high visibility can significantly deter impaired driving.

Context

Substantial progress has been made in reducing impaired driving in the United States since the early 1980s. According to the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS), 10,839 people were killed in alcohol-impaired driving crashes in 2009. This accounted for 32% of the total traffic fatalities in that year. The proportion of all drivers involved in fatal crashes estimated to have been legally intoxicated (blood alcohol concentration [BAC] ≥.08 grams per deciliter [g/dL]) has decreased from 35% in 1982 to 22% in 2009. However, since 1997, that percentage of drivers in fatal crashes with illegal BACs has remained stagnant at 21 to 22%. These percentages range from a low of 12% in the state of Utah to a high of 31% in the state of Montana. The variability within states (i.e., at the community level) is likely to be similar.

Among the many reasons for this wide variability in the states are the strategies used for impaired-driving enforcement. States with highly visible, highly publicized impaired-driving enforcement programs tend to have lower impaired-driving rates. Georgia is a good example. It has had highly visible, frequent, publicized sobriety checkpoints conducted throughout the state for the past several years (Fell, Langston, Lacey, Tippetts, & Cotton, 2008). Georgia now has one of the lowest impaired-driving rates in the United States.
driving rates in fatal crashes in the nation.

Although alcohol-impaired driving fatalities did decrease 7.4% from 2008 to 2009 (from 11,711 to 10,839), fatalities not involving an alcohol-impaired driver decreased by a greater percentage (10.7%), decreasing from 25,712 in 2008 to 22,969 in 2009. An additional estimated 200,000 people were injured in impaired-driving crashes in 2009. Many experts believe that public complacency, competing social and public health issues, and the lack of political fortitude have all contributed to the stagnation in progress. It seems apparent that political leaders need guidance on which measures will affect the problem and stakeholders need to be motivated once again to implement effective strategies. The solutions to impaired driving in the United States lie mainly at the state and community levels. That is where the laws are applied and enforced, where programs are implemented, and where changes can be made. Among the most successful strategies is the coupling of intense and highly visible enforcement with publicity about the enforcement campaign. The focus of this enforcement strategy is to deter driving after drinking in the first place by increasing the public’s perception of being caught, arrested, and prosecuted for impaired driving (a general deterrent strategy).

Research has indicated that well-publicized, frequently conducted, highly visible sobriety checkpoints deter impaired driving (Epperlein, 1985; Lacey et al., 1986a; 1986b; Levy, Asch, & Shea, 1990; Levy, Shea, & Asch, 1988; Voas, Rhodenizer, & Lynn, 1985; Wells, Preusser, & Williams, 1992). An evaluation of a demonstration program in Tennessee (Checkpoint Tennessee), using interrupted time series, showed a 20% reduction in alcohol-related fatal crashes when compared to projected alcohol-related fatal crashes if the program had not been implemented. It was also reported that the effects of the program extended at least 21 months after conclusion of the formal program (Lacey, Jones, & Smith, 1999). Lacey, Kelley-Baker, Ferguson, and Rider (2006) documented that low-staff checkpoints, publicized through earned media approaches, can be conducted weekly in relatively small and rural communities and can reduce alcohol-impaired driving dramatically. In a systematic review of the evidence, conducted by a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) panel of experts (Shults et al., 2001), 15 studies on the effectiveness of sobriety checkpoints were summarized. A meta-analysis was conducted that showed a median reduction of 20% in fatal and injury crashes associated with sobriety checkpoint programs. The CDC panel concluded that these studies “provide strong evidence” that sobriety checkpoints are effective in preventing alcohol-related fatalities and injuries. Visibility and community awareness of these checkpoint programs played a key role in their success. An examination of FARS data in 2010 found that, in states that report conducting sobriety checkpoints weekly, 34% of the drivers in fatal crashes were drinking (BAC>.01 g/dL) compared to 38% in states that conduct checkpoints infrequently and 41% in states that do not conduct checkpoints.

Objectives

For this project, we documented the key features of six impaired-driving (or driving while intoxicated [DWI]) enforcement programs designed to increase public visibility, using various sources and data-collection methods. We collected the following for each case study:

Which regions, states, communities, or police agencies are conducting the program? What highly visible enforcement strategies are being used? Where is the enforcement strategy being conducted (town, city, county, community, state, region)? When did the program start? Is it ongoing? Have there been changes? How is the strategy implemented and conducted? How many law enforcement officers does it take? What are the visibility components? Is there any evidence of success? Is the
program increasing visibility? How? Is there evidence of a decrease in impaired driving associated with the program?

After a thorough review of numerous potential program sites, six programs were selected for case studies: (a) Checkpoint Strikeforce (conducted in the Region III states of Delaware, Maryland, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia, and the District of Columbia); (b) Charles County Sheriff’s Office (Charles County, Maryland); (c) Anoka County, Minnesota; (d) Southeast Wisconsin High-Visibility Operating-While-Impaired (OWI) Task Force (Wisconsin); (e) Pasco County Sheriff’s Department in conjunction with the New Port Richey Police Department (Pasco County, Florida); and (f) Escondido Police Department (Escondido, California).

Key Outcomes

HVE elements

Following each case-study report is a summary of its HVE elements. The following are an accumulation of HVE activities used by law enforcement operations in the six case studies:

1. Data-driven identification of problem sites, using data related to alcohol-impaired crashes, DWI activity, and other criminal activity to identify areas most in need of HVE operations.

2. Sobriety checkpoints, including:
   - Large-scale checkpoints, staffed by at least 10 people;
   - Small-scale checkpoints staffed by three to five people;
   - Happy-hour checkpoints operated between 4 p.m. and 7 p.m.;
   - Nighttime checkpoints operated between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m.;
   - Roving checkpoint operations that are set up and operated at one location, then broken down and moved to a new location the same evening;
   - Phantom checkpoints, in which police set up what appears to be a checkpoint with the signs and cones, but never actually conduct one, or have one police car present to ensure the equipment is not vandalized and take action if a passing vehicle displays erratic driving behavior; and
   - Holiday or special occasion checkpoints (e.g., Saint Patrick’s Day or Monday Night Football checkpoints to address increased drinking associated with those occasions).

3. Saturation patrols in which an increased number of police cars patrol a segment of roadway or a neighborhood and trained law enforcement officers look for drivers who show signs of impairment. These special DWI patrols are generally conducted at the times and places where impaired-driving crashes and/or DWI arrests are occurring. To increase visibility, some of the saturation patrols are conducted during happy hours and on holiday weekends.

Visibility

High-visibility elements of checkpoint and saturation patrol

Fig 1. Aerial View of Checkpoint Strikeforce DUI Enforcement in Fairfax Virginia
operations are used to increase the visibility and clear purpose of the operations. These elements include the following:

- Lighted and/or variable message signs placed near the entrance of a checkpoint operation or segment of roadway associated with a saturation patrol to notify drivers of the checkpoint or saturation patrol.
- High-intensity lights that increase the visibility of checkpoint operations. They also provide extra lighting for law enforcement to work by and increase safety.
- Large, reflective signs placed near the entrance of a checkpoint operation or a segment of roadway associated with a saturation patrol to notify drivers of the operation.
- Large vans or trailers with specialized insignia often used for breath or blood testing, booking offenders, and administrative workspace. Often, reflective police insignia and anti-DWI slogans are used to add visual impact to the HVE operations.
- Specialized insignia (e.g., magnetic signs) on patrol cars, especially those associated with saturation patrols, identify them as being part of DUI or DWI enforcement efforts.
- Specialized insignia on officers (e.g., badges or lettering on reflective vests) identify them as being part of the anti-DWI efforts. These can be worn by officers both at checkpoints and on saturation patrols so that DWI enforcement is more evident to passing motorists when the officers are out of their vehicles during traffic stops.

**Media**

Publicity is essential to raise awareness of enforcement operations and educate the community about impaired-driving issues. Publicity includes the following:

- Paid or earned media on television, on the radio, in newspapers, on billboards, etc.
- Press releases from program officials to local media to encourage news stories about program activities.
- Letters to the editor and articles by program officials for publication in the local media.
- Mock checkpoints conducted for the news media to demonstrate how checkpoints operate, raise media interest in checkpoints, and potentially provide video footage for future television news stories.
- Signs on marquees used to raise awareness of anti-DWI activities. Similar to movie theatre marquees, these changeable signs are used by many local businesses, churches, schools, and other enterprises.
- Posters, coasters, etc., in local bars and restaurants with anti-DWI information specific to local enforcement activities.
- Flyers or cards given to motorists at checkpoints or traffic stops.
- Posters and billboards used to promote enforcement efforts.
Conclusions

HVE strategies can be creative and flexible. They need not depend on the use of sobriety checkpoints. In several states in which sobriety checkpoints are not allowed, agencies conducting HVE activities have nevertheless incorporated many of the high-visibility elements normally associated with checkpoints (e.g., publicity in media, increased concentration of law enforcement officers, lighted signs, reflective vests) into their HVE strategy.

Additional guidelines

Based upon information gathered in the case studies and discussions with case study officials, communities interested in developing and conducting an HVE program should consider the following:

1. Identify the impaired-driving problem in the community. How many deaths, injuries, and traffic crashes are associated with impaired driving? Where does impaired driving stand as a public health issue in the community? Is it on the radar screen? If not, get the numbers and compare them to other public safety issues in the community that are receiving attention.

2. Is there a local impaired-driving or traffic safety task force, coalition, or council? If so, use them to provide the foundation and support for the HVE program. If not, make an effort to create such a task force. This can provide the impetus to initiate the HVE program.

3. What are the existing resources for impaired-driving enforcement? Can resources be combined with other law enforcement agencies? Combining resources can help to sell the HVE program.

4. Are sobriety checkpoints allowed in the state? Are they conducted in the community? If so, they can be the centerpiece of the HVE effort. They have inherent high-visibility qualities. If not, other highly visible strategies should be considered (for example, saturation patrols with patrol cars marked “DWI Enforcement”).

5. Are there potential barriers or opposition to HVE in the community? If so, work with those groups or organizations to come up with compromises that will satisfy all parties.

6. Determine whether political support can be obtained from community leaders to conduct an HVE program (e.g., mayor, county supervisors, sheriff). Political support can speed up the implementation process.

7. Try to enlist local businesses and transportation alternatives as support for the program. They can help publicize the enforcement efforts and provide alternatives for would-be drinking drivers.

HVE impaired-driving strategies have the potential to initiate progress once again in the United States in reducing impaired-driving crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

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References


