
Research As an Advocate's Toolkit to Reduce Motor Vehicle Occupant Deaths and Injuries

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I am honored to provide commentary on the *Guide to Community Preventive Services: Reducing Injuries to Motor Vehicle Occupants*. This *Community Guide* will undoubtedly supply thousands of traffic safety advocates with the necessary information to change policy and save lives in our nation.

The release of this information could not be more timely. The news from the traffic safety advocacy field should be cause for concern. Traffic safety advocates are grappling with a plateau in our efforts to reduce motor vehicle death and injury. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) was alarmed to see that more than 16,000 people were killed in alcohol-related traffic crashes in 2000—the first increase in 5 years (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Preliminary FARS estimates, 2001). This year marked the first year in recent memory when no state enacted a primary safety belt law.¹ Last May, we were horrified to discover that a majority of children killed in alcohol-related crashes were driven by a drinking driver.² Recent months have been consumed by a media debate over the wisdom of maintaining the 21 national minimum drinking age law—one of the most effective measures to reduce alcohol-related traffic crashes.³

After 2 decades of moving forward in the effort to reduce motor vehicle deaths and injuries, it appears that the nation may be poised to take a step back. Now more than ever, we must do all that we can to ensure that we move forward. It is of critical importance that we focus our energies around solutions that are proven effective.

Thirty years ago, my family was rear-ended by a drinking driver with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of .08 percent. Upon impact, our car burst into flames. My family was catapulted onto the roadway. My daughter Lori and my nephew Mitchell died from the burns they sustained in the crash. My husband was badly burned in the crash. My neck was broken and 73% of my body was burned. I was pregnant at the time and our daughter, Kara, was born legally blind as a result of the injuries I sustained in the crash.

When our crash occurred, the laws and the public

perception regarding drunk driving and traffic safety were not as they are today. It was commonplace that someone—without a second thought—might choose to drink and drive. And, as in the case of the man who was responsible for taking the lives of our daughter and nephew, an offender would be given a slap on the wrist for this crime.

In 1980, MADD was founded and I quickly joined. For the past 20 years both victims and nonvictims have worked together with one common goal—to stop drunk driving and to support the victims of this violent crime.

We are joined in the fight for safer roadways by thousands of other traffic safety activists working on many different issues such as child passenger safety and safety belt usage. Over the last 20 years more than 2300 laws have been passed to prevent impaired driving. Hundreds of laws have been passed to improve occupant protection and child passenger safety. As we strive to change the laws and then work to see that they are fully enforced, we rely heavily on scientific data to accomplish our goals.

In order to advocate effectively for lifesaving legislation, advocates must have clear and compelling scientific evidence to provide a basis for policy change. The combination of scientific research and advocacy efforts is key to success at the federal level, in state legislatures, and in communities across the nation. The marriage of science and advocacy has been very successful in advancing the nation's efforts to improve traffic safety.

Many of the laws that provide the greatest lifesaving benefits are quite controversial, and policymakers are all too often reluctant to embrace changes to existing statutes. Opponents of these proposed laws are often well funded and have many resources at hand to stall legislative efforts.

Traffic safety advocates depend on research to advance our cause and provide us with the credibility that we must establish with policymakers and the media in order to move past the arguments of our opponents.

We weave research findings into every piece of our advocacy efforts. We refer to research in media materials and interviews, statistics and policy position statements, lobbying materials, Internet sites, information briefings, and our public statements.

Community guides like this one are the advocate's

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toolbox. This *Community Guide* provides a blueprint for advocates to follow in order to galvanize necessary policy change. It recommends a menu of policies for use in communities that choose to place priority on the laws and programs most likely to save lives and prevent injuries. It provides clear and concise information on research findings, effectiveness, applicability, positive and negative effects, cost benefit, and possible barriers to the implementation of each recommended solution.

Typically, advocates for policy change are not trained researchers. Many times we are just volunteer mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and concerned citizens who want to save lives and keep families together. For people like me who spend their days working to change public perception and pass effective laws and policies, this *Community Guide* is a map that leads us to the policy changes that will work most effectively and will enable us to reach our goals of reducing the number of motor vehicle deaths and injuries.

MADD is part of the Partners In Progress effort spearheaded by the Department of Transportation.⁴ Our goal is to reduce alcohol-impaired driving deaths to no more than 11,000 yearly by 2005. Clearly, we have a lot of work to do if we are to meet that goal in just 3 more years. We must put our efforts behind the recommendations outlined in this report. This *Community Guide* will be one of the most useful resources for any person working to improve traffic safety and public health.

Next year, the United States Congress will begin to focus on the 2003 reauthorization of the Transporta-

tion Efficiency Act of the 21st Century (TEA-21). Traffic safety advocates will be striving to ensure that traffic safety is a priority in this massive multi-billion dollar legislative package that will pave the roadways for the new millennium.

Traffic safety advocates will be working to maintain existing safety provisions, add new safety measures, and allocate more resources for traffic safety enforcement and research as well as prevention efforts. As we enter into this Congressional debate, the *Community Guide* can serve as the scientific justification for many improvements to our nation's highway funding legislation.

We have come so far in the last 20 years, but we have a long way to go in the fight to save lives and prevent injuries caused by motor vehicle crashes on America's roads. Complacency is our greatest enemy. We must refocus the nation on the issue of traffic safety and its importance to public health. Scientific research will provide that focus for us and will light the path for us to follow as we advocate for safer roads.

References

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