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Highway Safety Issues In Black/African-American Communities



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HIGHWAY SAFETY ISSUES IN BLACK/AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for Black Americans from birth through 14 years of age, and the second leading cause of death for the ages 15 through 24. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Black population is projected to grow 13 percent from 2000 to 2010, compared to 9 percent for the total U.S. population. These facts led the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to sponsor a study to identify traffic safety issues in Black communities and to identify communication strategies that could be used to direct traffic safety messages to Black populations.

Study Sites

Cordy & Company, Inc. conducted 48 focus groups with Black members of the public in six communities that, in combination, provided a diverse but representative sample of economic, demographic, and social environments.

Berkeley County, South Carolina (24.7% Black population) is a midsized Southern community on the rural outskirts of Charleston with a high growth rate, high home ownership, and low crime rates. Cook County, Illinois (26.9% Black) is a large, diverse population county in a major urban megalopolis with above average incomes and a service economy. Jackson County, Missouri (25.1% Black) is the core county of a midsized city having a strong lower middle class, a larger than average proportion of low-income households, but a smaller than average proportion of households below the poverty threshold. It is an "enclave" Black urban community in the Midwest. Middlesex County, New Jersey (9.2% Black) is an exurb of a major northeastern megalopolis, with a low proportion of Blacks and high incomes. There are few disparities in education and income between Blacks and other groups in this county. Oktibbeha County, Mississippi (36.9% Black) is a small Southern town with a large Black population. There are a large proportion of jobs in the government sector, a high number of households with children, and income and education disparities between Blacks and other groups. Prince George's County, Maryland (58.2% Black) is a suburb of a large mid Atlantic metropolitan area with a concentrated Black population and high incomes. The researchers also talked with 45 local community leaders, local activists, and service providers in these same communities.

Traffic Safety Problems Identified

1. Drinking and driving and aggressive and reckless driving were consistently identified as significant traffic safety problems across focus groups. Although drinking and driving was regularly cited as a top area of concern, many participants thought that Blacks were not the cause of the problem. There was inconsistency among the participants in how they defined drinking and driving, with some referring to driving when one is not capable of controlling the vehicle ("drunk driving") while others referred to drinking while in the act of driving.
2. Focus group participants at all sites expressed a belief that racial profiling is a serious problem and an ongoing practice of law enforcement. In particular, Black males felt that there was little that they can do to protect themselves from being victims of this practice. While most were able to separate the problem of racial profiling from the benefits of law enforcement, members of law enforcement were not seen as desirable leaders for traffic safety efforts.

3. Safety belt use among Blacks is inconsistent, with part-time use prevalent regardless of the community or the age of the participants. Most believed safety belts have a positive safety benefit. Safety belt use was also commonly seen as a reflection on the ability of the driver. Putting on a safety belt was often seen as a statement of no confidence in the driver's ability. There was little recognition of the unpredictable nature of crashes and that they occur in good and bad weather, on long or short trips, or due to another driver's error.
4. For younger participants, especially males, there was a strong relationship between driving and being "cool," or showing off ("styling and profiling"). Safety belts were not viewed as "cool."
5. Parents who said they did not wear safety belts still wanted to ensure the safety of their children by placing them in child restraints. Nonuse of safety seats was generally attributed to either economic constraints or indifference to safety. Awareness of booster seats was mixed.
6. Blacks have many of the same reasons for not wearing safety belts as the general population, such as discomfort, wrinkling clothes, and forgetting. Most Blacks, however, support safety belt laws, even if they do not consistently wear safety belts and believe that they are more likely to be pulled over for nonuse of safety belts than other drivers.
7. Local health and medical providers, Black religious leaders, and families were most often identified as the most trusted groups to lead traffic safety efforts. Churches and schools are trusted venues, but no group enjoyed unanimous support.
8. Messages should portray truthful, ordinary people in realistic situations.
9. Many participants believed that Black communities have inferior street systems in terms of design, construction, and maintenance.
10. Black participants were suspicious of safety statistics that do not match their own perceptions of the Black community's opinions or behavior.
11. There was a high level of interest about pedestrian issues and the dangerous challenges presented by pedestrians wearing dark clothing at night.

Three major obstacles to the effective communication of traffic safety messages to Black audiences are a distrust of law enforcement, skepticism regarding disseminated statistical information, and perceived inferiority of sidewalk and road conditions in Black compared to White communities. Black community members believed it was essential for traffic safety professionals to address these issues forthrightly to ensure that their safety messages are well received.

The report contains suggestions on how to address these issues, includes information gathered from the community leaders, and summarizes effective ways of promoting traffic safety to Black populations.

HOW TO ORDER

For a copy of *Highway Safety in Black/African-American Communities: Issues and Strategies* (91 pages plus appendices) write to Research and Technology, NHTSA, NTI-130, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590 or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Alan Block was the contract manager for this project.

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Traffic Tech is a publication to disseminate information about traffic safety programs, including evaluations, innovative programs, and new publications. Feel free to copy it as you wish. If you would like to receive a copy, contact Linda Cosgrove, Ph.D. or Patty Ellison-Potter, Ph.D., Editors, fax (202) 366-7096, e-mail: Patricia.Ellison-Potter@nhtsa.dot.gov