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Understanding Law Enforcement Attitudes and Beliefs about Traffic Safety

https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml

Introduction

Motor vehicle traffic crashes are a serious public health concern causing a tremendous burden on society. While progress in traffic safety has been made, motor vehicle traffic crashes are still the leading cause of death of those age 8 to 24 years and are the third leading cause of death for those age 25 to 34 years (Liu, Singh, and Subramanian 2015, pp. 1-5). To reach the goal of zero deaths on our nation's roadways, traffic safety initiatives must have a prominent role among state highway safety agencies and stakeholders. Traffic safety enforcement is critical and has shown to be effective in reducing a number of risky driving behaviors (DeAngelo and Hansen 2014, pp. 231-257; Stanojevi, Javanovic, and Lajunen 2013, pp. 29-38; Nikolaev, Robbins, and Jacobson 2010, pp. 182-193; Ryeng 2012, pp. 446-454; Nichols and Ledingham 2008).

Despite the positive benefits resulting from traffic enforcement efforts and community support, there is a perception that fewer resources are being allocated to traffic safety enforcement and there is some evidence of a declining trend in traffic safety enforcement (Dahl and Thompson 2017, pp. 1-48; Wiliszowski et al. 2001). A variety of factors including competing priorities, budget limitations, political support, and agency culture can influence engagement in traffic safety. A decrease in law enforcement's engagement in traffic safety could make it more difficult to reduce fatalities and serious injuries. Law enforcement plays a critical role; therefore, understanding the attitudes and beliefs of law enforcement leaders and officers regarding traffic safety is critical to growing a positive traffic safety culture and ultimately achieving a goal of zero deaths.

The goal of this project is to describe aspects of a law enforcement agency's culture (i.e., the shared values, attitudes, and beliefs) that are associated with their traffic safety enforcement efforts. Traffic safety culture is defined as "the values and beliefs shared among groups of road users and stakeholders that influence their decisions to behave or act in ways that affect traffic safety" (Ward, Otto, and Herbel 2016, pp. 11). Four states (Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, and Montana) initially agreed to participated in this study. Each state recruited law enforcement agencies to participate.

What We Did

The Center for Health and Safety Culture at Montana State University developed a survey instrument and interview protocol. The questions on the survey measured the key constructs represented by a behavioral model (Figure 1) based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010), the prototype willingness model

(Gerrard et al. 2008, pp. 29-61), and the role of values (Spates 1983, pp. 27–49; Oreg and Katz-Gerro 2006, pp. 462–483). The survey instrument was pilot tested and revised based on the pilot testing. The final survey was implemented with 568 officers in 19 different agencies (including statewide, sheriff's offices, and municipal agencies) in four states.

In addition to the survey instrument, interview questions were designed to augment the survey and provide additional understanding. Ten interviews of law enforcement leaders were conducted. The interviews were conducted over the phone by two Center for Health and Safety Culture research staff (one led the interview; the other took notes). The notes were summarized and then shared back with each interviewee for clarification or correction.

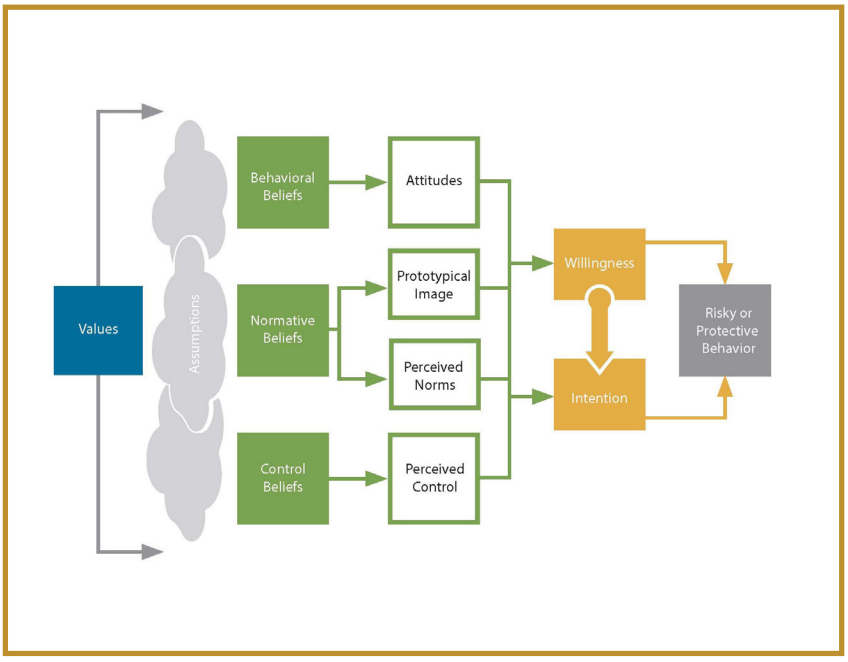

Figure 1: Behavioral Model

What We Found

Analyses of the survey results showed strong internal reliability. Linear regression models identified meaningful relationships between components of the model, and subsequent analyses of means, correlation coefficients, and relative frequencies provided information to answer the core research questions.

1. **How do law enforcement leaders and officers prioritize traffic safety relative to other public safety issues?**

On average, officers indicated traffic safety and enforcement were relatively high priorities (5.7 out of 7) with statewide agencies rating them higher than sheriff's offices or municipal agencies. An individual officer's prioritization was strongly correlated with their perception of how others prioritize traffic safety and enforcement – especially their perceptions of other officers in their agency and their immediate supervisor.

Interviews of law enforcement leaders indicated that traffic safety was a priority for municipal and sheriff's offices but calls for service were the top priority. The ability to make traffic safety a priority is heavily dependent on resources and staffing. These leaders also recognized the role agency leadership has in the prioritization of traffic safety enforcement. The leaders of a statewide agency placed traffic safety as the number one priority for the agency or unit as it is at the core of their agency mission.

Prioritization was strongly associated with engagement in enforcement activities. Officers who indicated a high prioritization (greater than six out of seven) were 3.5 times more likely to engage in frequent traffic safety enforcement compared to officers who indicated a lower prioritization (less than five out of seven).

2. **What are the self-reported behaviors and beliefs about traffic safety enforcement activities?**

Statewide law enforcement agencies engaged monthly or more often in enforcement activities addressing all four risky behaviors (not wearing a seat belt, speeding/aggressive, impaired, and distracted driving). County and municipal agencies engaged less frequently. Speeding/aggressive driving enforcement was more common than other enforcement activities.

On average, officers reported positive attitudes about traffic safety enforcement. Officers who indicated a positive attitude (greater than four out of seven) were 1.3 times more likely to engage in frequent traffic safety enforcement compared to officers who indicated a negative attitude (less than four out of seven).

All the interviewed law enforcement leaders strongly believed that traffic safety enforcement improves traffic safety. Some leaders believed that when the public sees an officer enforcing traffic laws, their behaviors change, they drive safer, and obey the laws out of fear of getting caught. One leader viewed every stop as an opportunity to educate the public rather than punish them. Most of the leaders recognized that engaging in traffic safety enforcement efforts improves the safety of the

communities they serve. However, some officers had beliefs that were not supportive of enforcement behaviors.

Officers who indicated higher expectations that they should regularly engage in enforcement activities were 2.5 times more likely to engage in frequent traffic safety enforcement compared to officers who indicated lower expectations. An officer's perceptions about the expectations of most officers, their immediate supervisor, and their commanding officer were strongly correlated with their own expectations.

An officer's sense of control about engaging in enforcement activities as well as their knowledge and training were significantly associated with engagement in enforcement activities. The most significant barriers identified were lack of time and lack of follow through by prosecutors and judges. While many officers indicated they knew where locations with traffic safety concerns were located, far fewer indicated they were well briefed on crash data and enforcement activities in their jurisdiction. Officers who participated in four or more training activities in the past three years were two times more likely to engage in frequent traffic safety enforcement compared to officers who indicated participating in two or fewer training activities.

3. How have law enforcement's perceptions of traffic safety enforcement behaviors changed in recent years?

About one-quarter of officers (24%) reported decreases in three or more enforcement areas. A similar portion (28%) reported increases in three or more enforcement areas. These larger decreases or increases were not associated with either rural or urban states nor with agency type. Seat belt enforcement and impaired driving enforcement were reported as decreasing more than speeding/aggressive driving enforcement and distracted driving enforcement. Distracted driving enforcement was reported as increasing the most.

4. How do prioritization of traffic safety attitudes, beliefs, enforcement behaviors, and perceptions of change vary between leaders and officers, agency types, and urban and rural settings?

There were very few statistically significant differences found between agencies of the same type in urban versus rural states. Thus, based on this sample, we did not find meaningful differences between traffic safety enforcement behaviors and related beliefs between urban and rural states.

However, there were statistically significant differences found between statewide agencies and sheriff's offices and municipal agencies. Statewide agencies reported higher levels of engagement in enforcement activities and had beliefs more supportive of engagement in enforcement activities. There were few statistically significant differences found between sheriff's offices and municipal agencies.

Interviews with statewide agency leaders revealed traffic safety enforcement was the top priority for their agency or unit. Traffic safety was at the core of their agency or unit's mission. Interviews with leaders in sheriff's offices and municipal agencies revealed that calls for service were the top priority for their agency and officers. Traffic safety enforcement was the primary focus when officers were not responding to other calls.

What the Researchers Recommend

Based on analyses of the survey responses and interviews, recommendations to increase traffic safety enforcement were made including:

1. Frame conversations and efforts to increase enforcement around concern for safety and agreement with zero deaths and serious injuries goals.
2. Increase the prioritization of traffic safety and traffic safety enforcement among officers.
3. Leaders and supervisors should establish clear expectations for regular and consistent traffic safety enforcement.
4. Work to reduce barriers to regular and consistent enforcement.
5. Bolster training and knowledge about traffic safety enforcement.
6. Use the Brief Survey and Dialogue Guide to facilitate a dialogue between agency leaders, supervisors, and officers (see the project's full report for the Dialogue Guide).

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For More Details . . .

The research is documented in Report FHWA/MT-19-003/8882-309-08, https://www.mdt.mt.gov/research/projects/trafficsafety.shtml.

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