American Public Opinion and Rural Road Safety

What Americans Think About Rural Road Risks and Policy Tools
Introductions
Background and Role on the Project

• Lee Munnich, CERS Director
• Joe Loveland, CERS communications consultant
• On phone for questions: Kevin Fay, Critical Insights
What is CERS?

• National Center of Excellence created by Congress
• CERS is uniquely, though not exclusively, focused on policy
• Headquartered at University of Minnesota
  – Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, State and Local Policy Program
  – Center for Transportation Studies (CTS)
What is CERS?

- FHWA’s designated national clearinghouse for road safety research: www.ruralhighwaysafety.org
- Safe Road Maps: www.saferoadmaps.org
- CERS summer institute focused on rural safety action agenda: August 9-10 in Minneapolis
- CERS web site: www.ruralsafety.umn.edu
Why Focus on Rural?

• 23% of the US population lived in rural areas in 2007, but 57% of all traffic fatalities occurred in rural areas
• The fatality rate per 100 VMT was 2.5 times higher in rural areas compared to urban areas
• Yet safety policies that we know save lives are not being widely enacted
Why?
We Asked Drivers

- Randomized national probability sample of 1,205 registered voters who drive weekly
- 20-minute phone interviews, March 23, 2010 to May 6, 2010
- Margin of error is +-2.8% for entire sample
- In partnership with Critical Insights of Portland, Maine
Findings
Perception: Rural Highways Safer than Urban Freeways

- **Rural Interstate.** 84% feel “safe” on interstate highways in rural areas (40% “very safe”/44% “somewhat safe”)

- **Rural Highway.** 79% feel “safe” on two lane highways in rural areas (31% “very safe”/48% “somewhat safe”)
Perception: Rural Highways Safer than Urban Freeways

- **Rural Interstate.** 84% feel “safe” on interstate highways in rural areas (40% “very safe”/44% “somewhat safe”)
- **Rural Highway.** 79% feel “safe” on two lane highways in rural areas (31% “very safe”/48% “somewhat safe”)
- **Urban Freeway.** 69% feel “safe” on multi-lane freeways in urban areas (20% “very safe”/48% “somewhat safe”)

CERS  
University of Minnesota
Why Do They Feel Safer on Rural Highways

• Open Ended Question (grouped into categories)
  – Less traffic/less congestion/less people: 51%
  – Know the area well/familiar/comfortable: 33%
  – Drive defensively/slower: 14%
  – Fewer risk of accidents: 9%
  – Other: 4%
So...

- Does the public misperception that rural highways are safest lead to more impaired and distracted driving on rural highways?
Rural Highways Most Likely Place For Drivers To...

- **Feel relaxed.** Rural highways are the most likely place for people to feel relaxed (38% on rural highway vs. 19% on urban freeway)
  
  - Among rural residents, 69% feel more relaxed on rural highways, versus just 13% who feel more relaxed on urban freeways
Rural Highways Most Likely Place For Drivers To...

• **Feel sleepy.** Rural highways are the most likely place for people to feel sleepy (42% on rural highway vs. 38% on urban freeway)
Rural Highways Most Likely Place For Drivers To...

- Allow themselves to be distracted
  - **Eating.** Rural highways are the more likely place for people to feel safe eating and driving (27% on a rural highway v. 21% on an urban freeway)
Rural Highways Most Likely Place For Drivers To...

• Allow themselves to be distracted
  – **Cell phone.** Rural highways are the more likely place for people to feel safe using a cell phone (24% on rural highway v. 19% urban freeway)
    • Among rural residents, 44% feel safe using a cell phone on a rural highway, versus 14% who feel safe using a cell phone on an urban freeway
Rural Highways Most Likely Place For Drivers To...

- **Feel comfortable drinking and driving.** Rural highways are the more likely place for Americans to endangered drinking and driving (17% feel less endangered on rural highways vs. just 7% who feel less endangered on urban freeways)
  - Among rural residents, 25% feel less endangered drinking and driving on rural highways
General Trend

- Americans are a bit more likely to feel comfortable engaging in risky behaviors on rural highways than on urban freeways.
Deviation From The Trend

- **Speeding.** Urban highways were the most likely place for people to feel safe speeding (47% on urban freeway v. 33% on rural highway)
Seasonal Risk Perceptions
Seasonal Risk Misperception

• An overwhelming 83% consider winter to be “the most dangerous season to be driving on rural roadways”
  – 8% said summer
  – 4% said spring
  – 4% said fall
So What Can We Do To Make Things Better?
CERS: Six Policies Strongly Supported By Research

• CERS’s Keith Knapp quantitative review of existing research on policies effect on rural road fatalities

• Available at [www.ruralsafety.umn.edu](http://www.ruralsafety.umn.edu)
CERS’s “Safe Six”
Six Policies Strongly Supported By Research

- Primary seat belt laws
- Sobriety checkpoints
- Motorcycle helmet mandate
- Graduated driver’s licenses
- Automated speed enforcement
- Breathalyzer-based ignition locks
Do Citizens Support Such Laws?

• Many policymakers and news reporters consider many of these policies too unpopular to enact
Media: “Controversial” and “Unpopular”

• “Though some officials say the (speed cameras) devices have a proven track record of curbing unsafe driving, the devices are unpopular with many drivers, who say governments use them to trap motorists.” – Prince George’s County (MD) Gazette

• “a controversial motorcycle law in the city of Myrtle Beach.” - WCIV-TV

• (Sobriety checkpoints are) “controversial and unpopular in both (political) parties.” – WMTV

• “the (breathalyzer ignition lock) legislation is proving to be controversial.” – WBAL-TV

• “Officials decline to renew the contract for the highly unpopular (speed camera) program…” Los Angeles Times
Are they really “unpopular” and “controversial” with Americans?
Primary Seat Belt Laws

“Allowing law enforcement officials to stop and ticket drivers for failure to obey seatbelt laws.”

• 72% of Americans support
  – 42% “very supportive”
  – 31% “somewhat supportive”
Sobriety Checkpoints

“Allowing law enforcement officials to stop drivers at checkpoints and ticket those driving drunk.”

• 82% support
  – 58% “very supportive”
  – 25% “somewhat supportive”
Graduated Driver’s Licenses

“Requiring new drivers to gain experience and skills gradually over time in low-risk environments before giving them a full driver’s license.”

• 88% support
  – 61% “very supportive”
  – 27% “somewhat supportive”
Breathalyzer-Based Ignition Locks

“Requiring people convicted of drunk driving to install a device on their car that locks the ignition if the driver fails an automated in-vehicle breathalyzer test.”

• 88% support
  – 68% “very supportive”
  – 20% “somewhat supportive”
Motorcycle Helmet Mandate

“Requiring motorcyclists to wear a helmet.”
Motorcycle Helmet Mandate

“Requiring motorcyclists to wear a helmet.”

- 84% support
  - 67% very supportive
  - 18% “somewhat supportive”
Automated Speed Enforcement

“Enforcing speed limits through the use of automated camera and radar devices.”

- 64% support
  - 29% “very supportive”
  - 35% “somewhat supportive”
Is 64% support too low?
Context: Even 64% Is Considered A “Landslide” In The Political World

• Largest “landslide” margins in history
  – Lyndon Johnson, 1964: 61%
  – Franklin Roosevelt, 1936: 61%
  – Richard Nixon, 1972: 61%
  – Warren Harding, 1920: 60%
  – Ronald Reagan, 1980: 59%
  – Theodore Roosevelt, 1904: 56%
Context: Many Proposals That Have Passed Had Less Than 64% Support

- Successful laws often have less support
  - National heath reform: 42% (Gallup, 2010)
  - Smoking ban in bars: 29% (Gallup, 2007)
  - Financial services industry rescue 42% (Gallup, 2008)
Support For Automated Enforcement Very High for Some Sites

- On roads near schools:
  - Very opposed: 8
  - Somewhat opposed: 5
  - Somewhat supportive: 22
  - Very supportive: 65

- On roads where many people have died:
  - Very opposed: 10
  - Somewhat opposed: 9
  - Somewhat supportive: 25
  - Very supportive: 56

- On roads where many people violate speed limits:
  - Very opposed: 13
  - Somewhat opposed: 12
  - Somewhat supportive: 28
  - Very supportive: 47

- On all roads:
  - Very opposed: 32
  - Somewhat opposed: 25
  - Somewhat supportive: 28
  - Very supportive: 15

Legend:
- Very opposed
- Somewhat opposed
- Somewhat supportive
- Very supportive
Nature of the Support
# Support Regardless of Ideology

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# Ideological Differences On One Issue

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Support Regardless of Residence

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# Modest Residential Difference On Helmets

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Gender Gap

• Support was high among both genders, but significantly higher among females than males
  – **Ignition Locks.** 92% support among women and 84% among men.
  – **Helmet Mandate.** 92% support among women and 77% among men.
  – **Sobriety Checkpoints.** 89% support among women and 75% among men.
  – **Primary Seatbelt Laws.** 79% support among women and 65% among men.
Generation Gap
On Automated Speed Enforcement

• Net Support
  – 59% for 18-34 year olds
  – 60% for 35-54 year olds
  – 67% for 55-64 year olds
  – 79% for people 65 years of age or older
Is Road Safety A Public Priority?

“How important is it to you that your local lawmakers are working to improve the safety of roads in your area?”

• 91% “important”
  – 65% “very important”
  – 26% “somewhat important”
Consistently High Prioritization

“How important is it to you that your local lawmakers are working to improve the safety of roads in your area?”

• Net “important”
  – Conservatives: 92%
  – Moderates: 86%
  – Liberals: 92%
  – Urban/Sm. City: 91%
  – Suburban: 90%
  – Rural/Sm. Town: 91%
  – Men: 87%
  – Women: 95%
Other Findings
Credible Messengers

- Ambulance staff
- Highway patrol/police
- Families of traffic crash victims
- Professors who have studied issues extensively
- Govt. transportation dept. officials
- Citizen-based safety orgs
- Newspaper reporters
- TV news reporters
- Statewide elected officials
- Local elected officials

Not at all believable, A little believable, Somewhat believable, Very believable

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Credible Messengers: Police and Paramedics, Not Just Pols
Big Picture

• Americans
  – Underestimates risks on rural roads
  – Are a bit more comfortable being distracted and impaired on rural roads
  – Underestimate risks in non-winter driving
  – Overwhelmingly support evidence-based road safety policies, including many regarded as controversial by policymakers
Outreach

- USA Today article in front section, June 3rd
- This webinar
- Independence Day weekend news release
- CERS national seminar, August 9-10
- Upcoming news release on risk assessment and behaviors
- Governor’s Highway Safety Association Presentation
- National Council on State Legislature (NCSL) Summit presentation
- Your sharing of this information in your area
Discussion