

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY ROAD SAFETY PROGRAMS IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

Prepared by: Peter Cairney, ARRB Transport Research Ltd

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1. A BRIEF STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

Increasingly, road safety authorities throughout Australasia are turning to partnerships with local government and other community bodies to deliver road safety programs tuned to local conditions and issues. While this strategy has many political and social advantages, measuring the road safety benefits can be more problematic. For community road safety programs to continue to be supported and to progress, it is necessary that they be based on a sound process and be able to provide evidence of their effectiveness.

2. AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROAD SAFETY ISSUE

2.1 Community road safety defined

In a comprehensive review for Austroads¹, Cairney identified the following defining characteristics for community or local government road safety:

- action (whether behavioural, engineering or enforcement) initiated and managed at the local rather than the national or state level
- action to tackle problems in the local area (whether local problems arising from local conditions or more general problems experienced in other communities)
- involvement of the local community either as service deliverers or in enhancing awareness of road safety issues.

These essential characteristics find expression through a number of quite different programs throughout Australia and New Zealand, ranging from formally legislated funding arrangements related to demographics and crash history, to more informal arrangements in response to requests arising within communities themselves. Despite the differences in management and funding arrangements, the rationale, the objectives and the basis of good practice are similar across all jurisdictions.

Cairney's review focuses on comprehensive road safety programs *initiated* at the local level to tackle a range of road safety issues facing a particular community. Another form of action has been action to tackle specific problems on their own through *community-based* programs. These generally take the form of a standard program which depends on community input for successful implementation, and need not be linked to any other local initiatives.

2.2 Rationale of community road safety

Local government is responsible for 80% of the road network in Australia² and the road casualty burden associated with local roads is considerable. For example, 22% of casualty crashes occur on local streets in the Melbourne metropolitan area, with a further 31% occurring at the intersections of local streets with arterial roads³. Recent experience in developing road safety plans for rural municipalities in Victoria suggests that approximately 50% of casualty crashes in rural areas occur on roads controlled by local government.

Specific roles which local programs can fulfil in response to this situation include:

- using local knowledge to target hazardous locations with safety countermeasures
- reaching groups and individuals who do not respond to mainstream media, through either personal contact or local community media – for example, non-English speakers and other marginalised groups
- providing a local focus which can complement state-wide programs
- providing a better understanding of how the local community is likely to react to proposed changes.

2.3 A general process for developing local road safety programs

Local road safety plans have proved to be very useful in directing action to priority issues at the local level and in ensuring effective management of programs. Some jurisdictions have developed comprehensive guides to planning^{4 5}, the essential features of which are:

- careful analysis of local crash data. If available, maps showing crash locations are a particularly useful data source
- consultation with the community
- action programs which have been developed to address the community's key issues, usually linked to state-wide strategy plans and with reasonably short-term objectives
- the mobilisation of local resources to deal with the community's road safety problems
- the allocation of responsibilities to different stakeholder organisations
- monitoring and evaluation.

Planning needs to occur at two levels:

- action plans, focussed on a narrower range of objectives which are achievable in the short term
- strategic plans for managing a wide range of issues in the longer term.

3. A REVIEW OF THE RESEARCH

Surprisingly, there does not appear to be any authoritative text on this topic. The best overall guide to principles and practice is probably to be found in the original six issues of the US Safe Communities newsletter, which cover issues ranging from conceptual foundations, to planning, implementation and evaluation⁶.

3.1 Evaluating community and local government road safety.

Evaluating local road safety programs is difficult. Due to the small numbers of crashes occurring in any one municipality, it is generally not feasible to evaluate programs in terms of crash reductions. Even when numbers of municipalities are combined, the effects achieved through local programs are slight compared to the impact of state-wide road safety projects or of general changes in society. As part of this issue, there is also the difficulty of separating the impact of local actions from the impact of broader strategies.

Process evaluation is frequently undertaken as part of locally based projects, using measures such as number of people attending events, number of leaflets distributed or participants' ratings of events. Process evaluation is important for establishing whether intermediary objectives have been achieved (for example, distribution of information and increased awareness) and for improving the delivery of programs in the future. However, it does not give a good indication of whether the program is creating a safer community in terms of reduced road trauma.

Although contribution to injury reduction is the ultimate goal of local programs, it is not usually possible to assess this directly. The most rigorous form of evaluation generally available for local programs is to assess changes in behaviour which occur in association with road safety interventions. To be meaningful, the changes in behaviour need to relate to injury reduction, such as reduced speed or seat belt wearing. Hence, where possible, local programs should be encouraged to evaluate programs by setting appropriate behavioural objectives and measuring the outcomes. The extent to which these objectives have been achieved can be assessed using the accompanying index measures¹.

Table 1: Assessing the objectives of local community road safety programs.

Objective	Index measures
Creating an informed community	
Raising the salience of road safety issues	Surveys of knowledge and attitudes; local media coverage.
Creating informed views on road safety	Surveys of knowledge.
Creating informed activism	Participation in projects.
Mobilising local resources to road safety ends	
Mobilising additional resources	Funding, sponsorship, volunteer hours, contributions in kind.
Creating a sense of ownership of road safety issues	Attitude surveys; attendance at events and public meetings.
Encouraging community involvement	Participation in program delivery; extent of comment offered on issues and proposals; attendance at events.
Enhancing the sense of community	Not readily measured.
Promoting effective action	
Targeting resources to risk in the community	Absolute amount and % of resources devoted to key activities.
Complementing and enhancing state-wide objectives	Absolute amount and % of resources devoted to state-wide programs and local programs which target similar issues.
Making effective contributions to road safety outcomes	Behaviour change; surveys of knowledge, attitudes and beliefs.
Encouraging good practice	Evaluation of outcomes.
Encouraging innovation	Difficult to assess, apart from number of new approaches tried.
Influencing key stakeholders	Stakeholder attendance at meetings and contribution to activities.
Integrating Activities	
Ensuring mutually supportive activities	Not readily measured.
Creating a road safety "culture"	Not readily measured.

3.2 Examples of successful programs

Community and local government road safety programs embrace a wide variety of programs. In a well-thought out program, the activities will match the road safety needs of the community. Four examples of successful programs are described in Attachment 1.

The few reviews or evaluations of community-based programs include:

- Rose reviewed the programs which apply in different States⁷. New South Wales, Western Australia and Victoria have well-established programs which, in various ways, combine engineering treatments with awareness and road safety education. South Australia is starting to engage in a similar program;
- Couch, McCutcheon and Cirocco⁸ presented a preliminary report of an extensive evaluation of the process of implementing a Safe Routes to Schools program at seven primary schools in South Australia. The preliminary status of the report means results are reported in very general terms. However, it appears that traffic problems were resolved at the schools which had moved beyond the planning stage, and the experience of successfully tackling these issues was empowering for schools and gave them confidence that ongoing and emerging road safety issues could be tackled successfully;
- the same authors reported an evaluation of a Walk with Care intervention, targeted at elderly inner suburban residents⁹. This program worked well when centred around socially valued activities in a manner which recognised the changing capacities of the older person but which was not patronising or condescending. Note that the community-based programs face similar evaluation issues as the community-initiated programs.

4. POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND OTHER FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH COMMUNITY ROAD SAFETY

The 'top-down' delivery of road safety programs (for example, the mass education and enforcement programs targeting drink-driving and speeding and the development of safer roads and safer vehicles through engineering and technological advances) has resulted in some major, demonstrable impacts upon the road toll. Their success notwithstanding, there is also the potential for a 'bottom-up' approach to road safety based on local community issues and solutions.

The latter approach is of evident appeal to central road safety authorities in that it allows the burden of the task to be spread across the whole community, rather than remaining the responsibility of one agency. However, if community involvement in road safety is to be successful, it requires that central authorities be prepared to provide both financial and material resources at least for the early stages of each program. There is also a reciprocal responsibility upon those running the local programs, in that the future of this general approach evidence that programs are being delivered effectively and behaviour is being changed in ways likely to reduce road trauma.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Cairney's review of community road safety¹ concluded that that Community Road Safety is generally recognised as an element of good road safety practice, and that, properly managed, it can be effective in increasing awareness of issues, imparting knowledge and changing some aspects of road user behaviour. However, its claim to effectiveness and its long-term future would be strengthened by a convincing demonstration of its impact in reducing crashes, although it was acknowledged that this will be difficult to achieve in practice.

A number of recommendations for good practice were identified, the most relevant of which are as follows:

- local government should be encouraged to develop a strategic road safety plan wherever possible, and the plan and its activities should be formally incorporated into councils' corporate plans
- the dynamics of local organisations require that they be kept active in meaningful and personally rewarding activity
- the current emphasis on evaluation of all projects should be maintained and strengthened, recognising the need to balance the resources put into evaluation with the scale of the activity
- community road safety strategic plans and other activities should be encouraged to focus most of their effort on major road safety issues in the local area, as determined by careful examination of crash statistics
- there is a need to educate senior management and elected representatives in local government regarding the benefits of community road safety and its potential role in addressing major road safety issues
- the importance of local ownership of committees and plans should be recognised and nurtured
- the professionalism of Road Safety Officers/ Coordinators should be increased through the provision of in-service training and the availability of tertiary-level courses leading to recognised qualifications.

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