Traffic Safety Culture in Iowa—Public versus Expert Opinions

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Abstract

In 2010, the Iowa Department of Transportation (DOT) asked researchers at Iowa State University’s Institute for Transportation (InTrans) to study the traffic safety culture in Iowa through the eyes of a diverse range of experts. At that time, it was noted that, while Iowa and other states had worked tirelessly to produce a culture of safety through their comprehensive highway safety plan (CHSP) and other efforts, vehicle crashes remained among the leading causes of death in the US. In Iowa alone, an average of 445 deaths and thousands of injuries occur on public roads each year. The study completed in April 2011 included diverse perspectives from the disciplines of public health, education, law enforcement, public policy, social psychology, safety advocacy, and engineering. In addition to summarizing the “best practices” and effective laws in improving traffic safety culture, the study also recommended 11 high-level goals, each with specific actions to support its success.

As a follow-up to the April 2011 study, a second phase was undertaken that brought together Iowa’s three large public universities (Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa, and University of Iowa) to focus on producing actions that would ultimately improve the traffic safety culture across Iowa. The focus of the second phase was on synthesizing the expert opinions solicited in Phase I with prevailing public views and/or opinions. More recent data on the opinions of Iowans and of people nationally contrasted with past data would help better define the public’s position on top safety culture issues. The public perspective was gathered via a follow-up to Iowa’s 2000 public opinion survey, which was administered by the University of Northern Iowa’s Center for Social and Behavioral Research. The survey covered a wide range of traffic safety topics, including driver education, traffic enforcement, road design and engineering, distracted driving and other driving behaviors, and attitudes about traffic safety policies, procedures, and enforcement techniques.

The research team at InTrans identified key survey elements that were common between the 2000 and 2011 public opinion surveys and summarized changes in public opinion between the two surveys. In addition, this presentation will synthesize the results of public opinion surveys and expert interviews, as well as “best safety practices” in Iowa, and make recommendations to the Iowa DOT on actions that will make a tangible difference in improving traffic safety in Iowa.

Keywords: safety culture—Iowa—survey—public opinions

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