By popular demand, crash reporting changes underway

If you want safer roads, you have to have accurate and effective crash reporting. That’s why traffic safety experts and researchers — but especially Texas law enforcement officers — are cheering a proposed new crash-reporting form.

The new form was the result of a collaboration between TTI and the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) designed to make crash scene reporting easier and more accurate.

“But because traffic statistics determine so many things related to safer roads — how safety dollars are spent and what transportation research is conducted — accurate crash reporting is critical,” explains Troy Walden, an Associate Research Scientist in the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS). “We think the new form could have an important impact on safety...and we are especially pleased that it meets the needs of TxDOT.”

Walden says that many law enforcement officers across the state were experiencing frustration with the crash-reporting form that went into effect in January of 2010.

“So, in July, TxDOT challenged us to come up with a new user-friendly version that would satisfy the needs for data collection by law enforcement in the field, but also conform to the data entry requirements needed for proper coding into the Crash Records Information System [CRIS],” Walden said.

Walden and Senior Research Specialist Bob Gilbert, both former law enforcement officers, conducted numerous forums and surveys with agencies across the state in order to gain feedback concerning the usability of the previous version of the crash-reporting
Impaired driving program assessment

Texas usually leads the country in the number of alcohol related traffic deaths, but in 2008 — with 40 percent of all traffic deaths alcohol related — the Lone Star State also had one of the highest rates in the country. It’s a sobering fact not lost on Research Scientist Melissa Walden of the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS).

Each year since 2002, Walden prepares the “Texas Impaired Driving Program Self Assessment” for the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). The assessment is an examination that attempts to find out why our rates are so high and offers possible remedies.

“On the surface, it would seem that reducing our alcohol related crash numbers would be easy: just don’t drink and drive, prosecute those that do, and enact new laws and procedures to catch offenders. But in reality, the issue is extremely complex requiring a lot of fine-tuning to make an impact,” Walden says, pointing to numerous issues specific to Texas that have hampered efforts.

- Texas lacks a data system that tracks individuals from arrest to adjudication.
- Administrative license revocation for DWI offenders may not be productive.
- In the court system, less-experienced prosecutors are often pitted against defense attorneys who specialize in DWI cases.
- Legislative attempts, like the approval of sobriety checkpoints, have not succeeded.

Those issues and many others are spelled out in the 55-page Texas Impaired Driving Program Self Assessment report — a “living document” which highlights the positive initiatives currently underway and identifies the gaps that need to be addressed.

In order to compile the document, representatives from 25 agencies and organizations examine the problems specific to their line of work. The result has been an open dialogue that has uncovered numerous issues that have hindered their efforts.

“The individuals who have offered invaluable insight to the problem have been law officers who are charged with finding and collecting evidence against violators, members of the judicial community who are often overwhelmed with high case loads and ever-changing laws and restrictions, medical personnel who see the results of alcohol related crashes and members of advocacy groups who deal with the issue of drunk driving every day,” Walden says. She calls their participation the project’s most important accomplishment.
Making cars safer with advanced warning systems has the potential for causing other safety concerns for drivers. That dilemma is the basis for a new contract awarded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to TTI and other team members.

“The U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. DOT) is supporting efforts for automobile manufacturers and their suppliers to develop communications systems that allow vehicles to ‘talk’ to each other and to the roadside,” says Human Factors Program Manager Sue Chrysler. “These systems offer great potential for enhanced safety systems that are currently only available through expensive onboard sensors. But do those warnings, and the alarms and flashing lights that come with them, cause drivers to be distracted?”

TTI’s role in the NHTSA project, entitled Human Factors for Connected Vehicles, is to help develop a set of tests to measure the distraction potential of the individual warning systems. Human Factors Program Researchers Joel Cooper and Christine Yager are both major contributors to the project. The team is working to minimize the distraction potential of the system, not only for safety, but for mobility and sustainability applications as well.

Their initial work will focus on developing metrics to quantify the degrees of distraction potential of the Connected Vehicle System in terms of their effect on driving performance. Certain display configurations, for instance, are expected to have more distraction potential than others. Similarly, auditory warnings may in some cases be preferable to visual dashboard warning lights. The researchers have already developed some Connected Vehicle-like tasks that will be part of the evaluations done in a driving simulator and also in a real-world environment on TTI’s test track facility. The research will be the first to examine and measure an overall advance warning system, rather than examining individual subsystems.

Connected Vehicles technology will have a range of more than 300 meters, so it will be feasible to make far more information available to drivers than currently possible. The challenge lies in how to do so without distracting those drivers.

Other research team members include the University of Iowa, consultant Linda Angell, and the human factors arm of WESTAT, which is leading the nine-month project. The human factors track for the Connected Vehicles program extends over the next five years, and this project is one of the first tasks in that program.
Safety experts to gather in pursuit of more improvements

Despite what should be encouraging news about the recent drop in fatalities in Texas and across the country, traffic safety experts are feeling frustrated — knowing that so much more could be done to reduce traffic deaths further.

For its third Statewide Traffic Safety Conference in Austin March 21-23, the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) has developed an agenda that will examine innovative ideas designed to save lives. Partners with CTS include the Texas Department of Transportation and the Texas Department of Public Safety.

“Yes, a drop in fatalities the last two years has been fantastic…it’s why we come to work every day,” says CTS Director John Mounce. “But, we also realize that part of the decline may be due to the economy and the fact that people are driving less. Now, more than ever, we need to really evaluate how to change driver behavior, which would lead to fewer deaths on our roadways.”

Mounce says impaired driving and distracted driving continue to be two major contributors to traffic deaths, in Texas and nationwide. “Imagine if we could get a handle on just those issues,” he says, pointing out that they are just two of many topics to be addressed at the conference.

“Traffic Safety in Texas: We’re all in this together” is the theme for the 2011 Statewide Traffic Safety Conference organized and sponsored by the Texas Transportation Institute. Engineers, educators, emergency services providers, researchers, law enforcement and many other groups dedicated to traffic safety are attending the event.

Conference Program Chair Val Pezoldt, who is a Research Scientist at CTS, says the planned speakers have been eager to donate their time and are enthusiastic about sharing their experiences and expertise.

“They are also in the business of saving lives and know that an idea they share with the group could have a very positive impact in their community or business,” he says.

Mark your calendar and make plans to attend!
2011 statewide Traffic Safety Conference preview

Presentation highlights for the conference include:

• Bella Dinh-Zarr, North American Director of the Make Roads Safe campaign and Director of Road Safety for The FIA Foundation (Fédération International de l’Automobile). Dinh-Zarr will outline the FIA Foundation’s plans for the Global Road Safety Decade of Action.

• Terry Pence, Director, Traffic Safety Section, TxDOT. Pence will focus on the most critical traffic/transportation safety issues and challenges facing Texas from his perspective as Director of the Traffic Safety Program.

• Janice Brown, Administrator, Texas Division of the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). Brown will highlight the most critical traffic/transportation safety issues and challenges facing Texas and the Nation from the FHWA perspective.

• Art Acevedo, Chief, Austin Police Department. Chief Acevedo will provide his perspective on traffic safety issues as the head of one of the major police departments in our state.

Through special arrangements with the Federal Highway Administration, conference attendees can take advantage of a full day pre-conference Road Safety Audits for Local Governments Workshop at no additional cost. The FHWA limited-space workshop is designed to introduce road safety audits as an effective tool that can help to reduce injuries and fatalities on your road network. The workshop will demonstrate that low cost safety improvements can be implemented quickly to reduce fatalities and severe crashes.

Online registration will be available until 5:00 p.m. CST, Tuesday, March 8, 2011. After this date, please plan to register on-site at the Hilton Austin Airport Hotel.

Fifteen breakout sessions are planned for the conference including:

• Innovations in Traffic Safety: Emerging Safety Techniques
• Enhancing Prosecution of DWI, Intoxication Assault and Manslaughter
• Austin’s Highway Enforcement Command
• Child Passenger Occupant Protection
• Safety Innovations in Work Zones
• Motorcycle Safety
• C.R.A.S.H. - Crash Reporting and Analysis for Safer Highways: An online application to process the CR3 state crash report easier, faster and free

For a full list and description of all breakout sessions, please visit: http://tti.tamu.edu/conferences/traffic_safety11/
Safety culture survey reflects mixed opinions among drivers

More than a third of Texas drivers feel less safe on the roadways than they did five years ago, and they see the source of the increased danger in other drivers who are more likely to be aggressive and either talk or text on cell phones.

And although well over half believe that vehicle safety is better, only 20 percent say that they, themselves, feel safer than before, even though traffic deaths in Texas have generally declined in recent years.

Still, Texans generally feel safer on the roads than drivers nationwide, as measured in the 2010 Traffic Safety Culture Index published by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. In that survey, 52 percent of drivers nationwide said they feel less safe, while the number in Texas is 34 percent.

These and other insights are reflected in a recent study conducted by the Center for Transportation Safety (CTS) at the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), which involved 1,167 respondents who were surveyed at Texas Department of Public Safety Driver License Offices across the state during September and October.

“What we were hoping to do with the survey is establish a baseline of driver awareness and opinions regarding roadway safety,” says TTI Senior Research Scientist Quinn Brackett, who directed the survey.

“By doing so, we can track changes in the traffic safety culture of Texas motorists.”

After several years of nearly constant fatality rates, trends both nationwide and in Texas began to reflect a decline in recent years, due in large part to stepped-up law enforcement and engineering improvements associated with both roadways and vehicles. However, a growing number of experts believe that further improvements will be incremental at best if solutions are limited to enforcement and engineering. The Texas Traffic Safety Culture Survey was conducted to gain an understanding of drivers’ attitudes. Researchers plan to repeat the survey in future years to measure changes in those attitudes.

Among other major findings, researchers found that:

- More than four out of five respondents say that texting while driving is a bigger problem than it was five years ago, and 81 percent say that cell phone use has gotten worse.
- Well over half say aggressive driving is worse, and nearly half say the same thing about driver courtesy.
- More than 40 percent say that speeding is worse.

Regarding views related to laws in Texas, researchers found that:

- Supporters of a law to ban cell phone use while driving outnumber opponents by a two-to-one margin.
- Supporters also outnumber opponents when it comes to the use of red light cameras, sobriety checkpoints, and also in requiring the use of ignition interlock devices for drivers with DWI convictions.
- Seven out of ten favor a law that would require all motorcyclists to wear helmets.
- Survey participants were generally opposed to raising the state’s gasoline tax to pay for new roads or to make the roads safer.

The survey was conducted in 10 locations and reflects a cross-section of the opinions of the adult population in Texas.

See a video report on the Texas Safety Culture Survey at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZMT_xHWkvFw

View the full report of the Texas survey at http://tti.tamu.edu/group/cts/2010/12/01/traffic-deaths-down-but-many-feel-less-safe/
Crash losses far exceed crime losses, but news coverage doesn’t reflect sizeable disparity

Losses resulting from vehicle crashes exceed those that are linked to crime by as much as two to three times every year in Texas, but you might not know that by looking at the news headlines from day to day. In fact, not only does the volume of online exposure fail to match up proportionally to the magnitude of both issues – it doesn’t even come close.

During 2009, the number of murders reported in Texas was 1,327, less than half the crash fatality total of 3,089. In the same year, there were 116,002 serious crimes, as compared to 235,280 serious injuries resulting from car crashes. Economic costs associated with crash deaths totaled $13.2 billion, more than double the $5.7 billion cost of murder.

Even with such staggering measures, crash losses are vastly overshadowed by the attention devoted to criminal activity. For example, an internet search for “car crashes in the news” produces 5.4 million results, but a search for “crime in the news” yields a whopping 458 million results. A more specific search for Texas produces 1.8 million results for crashes, and 79 million for crime.

So what does this mean?

“People have become complacent, tolerating traffic crashes as something inevitable – the price we pay for living in a mobile society,” says Dr. Quinn Brackett, a Senior Research Scientist in TTI’s Center for Transportation Safety. “If traffic crashes are accepted as routine, then they are usually not deemed newsworthy, not unless they involve other unusual circumstances, such as a high body count or if one or more of the victims is well known.”

In addition, many people believe that crimes are acts of volition, whereas crashes are most often thought of as unavoidable accidents. Quite the contrary, Brackett says. Even though a driver may not consciously seek to do harm, behaviors such as speeding, drinking and texting while driving are all volitional acts that can result in death or injury.

Crash deaths and injuries remain at unacceptable levels, but recent trends offer a glimmer of good news. Losses resulting from both crime and motor vehicle crashes in Texas have declined in recent years, and the drop for crash losses has been noticeably steeper.

The number of murders dropped five percent from 2005 to 2009, while the number of traffic deaths fell 13 percent. Serious crimes were down by three percent during the same period, while serious crash injuries fell by almost 20 percent.

Experience suggests that further reductions in both categories could be realized if more cities established traffic divisions within their local police departments, increasing the potential for criminal apprehension in the course of traffic stops. It was a traffic stop, after all, which led to the apprehension of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh.

Brackett notes that the disproportionate amount of attention devoted to traffic safety issues in the news further underscores a need to change our driving culture to one that values civility over convenience.

“Such a profound culture shift will take time, but it is certainly achievable,” he says. “Part of that will involve moving away from the anonymous driver to a driver that is aware that operating a vehicle on the roadway is a socially connective activity – that taking risks when driving increases the risk for everyone in the traffic stream.”
Cypress Falls students engage peers with TDS program

A recent survey shows that Cypress Falls students are more likely to engage in risky driving habits than other Texas teens, prompting the school to launch Teens in the Driver Seat (TDS), the nation’s first peer-to-peer safety program for young drivers.

More than 400 Texas teens die every year in traffic crashes, by far the number-one killer of young people. Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) researchers attribute the crashes to inexperience, combined with one or more of the five main risks that plague young drivers: driving at night, distractions (primarily cell phones, texting and other teen passengers), speeding, low seat belt use, and alcohol.

TTI surveyed 435 Cypress Falls HS students in October, and compared findings to surveys done at numerous other urban high schools across Texas. This ongoing examination of teen driving behavior is the most extensive review of its kind ever done in Texas or in the United States. Among the findings:

- 64 percent of Cypress Falls students say they often drive late at night, compared with 49 percent of students statewide. Driving at night is the most common risk factor for teenage drivers.
- 46 percent of Cypress Falls students say they often talk on a cell phone while driving compared with 40 percent of Texas students.
- 60 percent of Cypress Falls students say they often speed, compared to 44 percent of Texas students.

However, Cypress Falls students were less likely to drive without a seatbelt (17 percent) than other Texas students (24 percent). Regarding alcohol use, the groups were tied at 13 percent.

Unlike other safety initiatives targeting young people behind the wheel, TDS involves teens directly to help develop and deliver the right safety messages.

“Numerous studies – and our own experience – tell us that teenagers listen to and significantly influence each other,” said Cypress Falls Principal Becky Denton. “We are so excited that our students have become the voice for safe driving and that they are spreading that message to their peers, their families and community.

TTI developed TDS and provides the science, materials and support for the program, while each student group determines how the program will work in their school.

“Most young drivers don’t know that they’re 10 times more likely to die in a crash than people in other age groups,” says Program creator Russell Henk of TTI. “But they need to hear the message from a source they trust; they need to hear it from each other. That’s what Teens in the Driver Seat is all about.”

The Teens in the Driver Seat program is offered to Texas schools through funding support from the Texas Department of Transportation and State Farm Insurance.

Schools interested in starting the program can learn more at www.t-driver.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Dr. John Mounce, Ph.D., P.E.
Center for Transportation Safety
Texas Transportation Institute
Texas A&M University System
3135 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843-3135
ph. (979) 845-2736 · fax (979) 845-4872
j-mounce@tamu.edu

SafetyNET is produced quarterly by the Center for Transportation Safety. The Center, established by the Texas Legislature in 2001, conducts research and outreach programs through contracts secured with state and federal governmental agencies, as well as private sector interests. The Center’s work is focused on developing safer roadways, safer drivers, and addressing the needs of high-risk groups.