

“Safety’s not a problem in my State, ” we were told by one middle-aged man in a predominantly rural State. “There are so few cars on the road here that I put my *Time* magazine on the steering wheel and drive to work at 80 mph. By the time I get there, I’ve finished reading the magazine. ” (Statistics released in the local press shortly after we heard these remarks showed that this particular State had one of the highest traffic accident rates in the country.)

Respondents of all ages, from diverse backgrounds, from large and small communities, from every region of the United States insisted that “cars aren’t the cause of accidents, people are!” A member of a leading automobile association stated that safety was one of his organization’s main concerns, and that they viewed “the person behind the wheel” as the primary problem.

People complained bitterly about drunk drivers and “just plain bad drivers. ” They were angry about people who “drive aggressive] y and take their frustrations out behind the wheel of a car;” those who think it’s “neat to get loaded on narcotics or liquor and attempt to drive;” and those “who think 0 to 80 in 6 seconds is the greatest thing in the world and will leave tons of rubber on the pavement to prove it (they also leave cadavers when something goes wrong), ” Many respondents compared the safety rates for auto travel to travel by mass transportation. “Thousands of people died on the highways last year, but not one person died on Amtrak, ” a Massachusetts woman noted.

More responsibility should be placed on the driver, respondents said, and stronger penalties levied on those who drive recklessly. This was the one area where people generally agreed that Federal, State, and local governments should be heavily involved. They also said that national disincentives aimed at drunk drivers and habitually poor drivers should be adopted nationally and applied uniformly.

Current driver education programs are inadequate, they said, and licensing requirements should be tightened. Driver education programs

Table 3.— 1977 Traffic Crash Data

Crashes	^a 17,600,000	
Vehicles Involved ^d		29,800,000
Injuries	^b ..	4,392,000
Deaths ^c		47,700
Auto occupants.....		(27,400)
Pickup, van occupants		(5,200)
Motorcycle		(4,200)
Pedestrian, pedacycle.....		(8,600)
Truck, bus, and other		(2,400)
Estimated.....costo.		\$44 billion

^aOTA estimates from National Safety Council data
^bU.S. Public Health Service

^cU.S. DOT Fatal Accident Reporting System figures rounded
^dU.S. DOT updated area originally from 1975 Societal Costs of Motor Vehicle Accidents This figure does not include costs associated with pain, suffering loss of relationship, and the like

should not be limited to the young or beginning drivers, rather they should be extended to drivers of all ages. For example, some State agencies and a number of companies now offer defensive driving courses for their employees. Some even require their employees to take these courses periodically. Additionally, “license exams should be standardized, ” we were told, “and testing should be continuous, not just a once-in-a-lifetime event. ”

Cyclists should obey traffic laws, too, and motorists should be trained to watch out for cyclists, “just as they watch out for trucks and motorcycles and taxicabs,” northwestern respondents told us. Several bike riders suggested requiring a license and/or a minimum age for cycling. As one cyclist put it, “Fifty percent of the bike accidents occur to kids under 12, and 50 percent of the auto accidents involve people under 24. Maybe the legal age limit for cyclists should be 12 at a minimum, and for car drivers, at least 24. ”

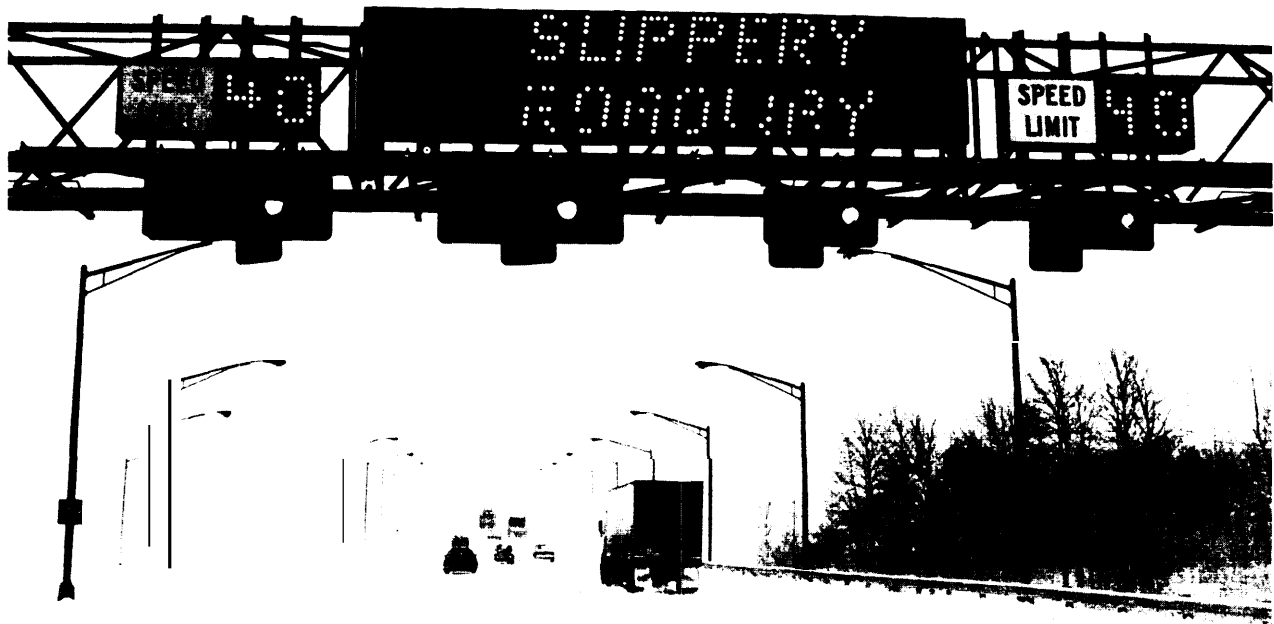


Photo credit Sylvia Johnson 1979

Hazardous road conditions place an extra strain on drivers

"The psychology of driving and bad driving should be examined," said one woman, reiterating the viewpoint of many respondents. "We don't understand the man-machine interface too well," another person said, then added that "the drinking and driving relationship should be examined closely." "Drinking to excess and driving is macho," explained a southerner.

Various approaches were suggested to curb abusive use of alcohol, which was viewed by many respondents as "the No. 1 social and safety problem." Businesses, unions, and police departments throughout the United States are experimenting with rehabilitation programs. Tavern owners in one State we visited are held partially responsible for the sobriety, or lack thereof, of their customers. In June 1978, the Governor of Ohio signed a bill requiring insurance groups of 25 or more to cover in- and out-patient treatment for alcoholics. The respondents claimed that much more needs to be done: programs should be expanded, assistance extended, and peer pressure applied in the effort to combat alcoholism.

"Uniformity" was a key word in the safety discussions. "The Nation needs uniform traffic codes and road standards." "Penalties for traffic violations should be uniform, strict, and rigidly enforced." "Inspection and maintenance should be uniformly required throughout the U. S." "The Federal Government should set uniform manufacturing standards."

Vehicles and roadways were not ignored in the safety discussions, although they were of less concern than bad drivers. The most commonly heard remarks about roads emphasized the need for better maintenance and repair of the Nation's bridges and highways, the removal of hazardous obstacles and "death traps," and the improvement of signing and lighting. A substantial number of people said that "trucks and cars don't mix," and that the two should be separated. Many suggested that trucking in general be greatly decreased with railroads moving more freight. They also favored a reduction in truck weight limits. While a handful of people thought speed limits should be raised, most said they favored the 55-mph limit and that it should be better enforced.



Photo credit U S Department of Transportation

"Trucks and cars don't mix . . ."



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As for automobiles themselves, some individuals felt that the Federal Government should "mandate fail-safe cars." A larger number said that "industry should improve car designs" to make them safer. The results of surveys by two auto clubs in the midwest and northwest, which were shared with us, illustrate the type of response we received on the issue of safety devices. The survey respondents indicated that they were aware of the utility of seat belt usage, but felt that mandatory use was unwarranted. It is contrary to "freedom of choice." "We don't want Government agencies telling us what to do," said respondents, although many claimed that they voluntarily use seat belts now. Paradoxically, most of the people we talked to preferred to be in charge of their own individual safety, but wanted someone else, i.e., the Government or industry, to be responsible for the safety of others (most frequently mentioned were family members).

To safeguard "pedestrians who don't have bumpers," it was suggested that with advancements in electronics it would perhaps be possible to equip future vehicles with a pedestrian- or accident-avoidance device. Accidents were not the only thing motorists were trying to avoid.



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They were also fearful of crime. "People are becoming so frightened that we use cars instead of buses," a California woman told us. An easterner claimed, "People feel safe in their cars with all the buttons pushed down. They don't have this degree of safety when walking on city streets or riding public transportation."

Respondents focused mainly on measures to improve driving habits as the principal means to increase safety. The OTA analysis found that in

the next 5 to 10 years, the greatest safety benefits would accrue from reduction of alcohol use associated with driving, strict enforcement of the 55-mph speed limit, and increased use of seat belts. The technical research also indicated that a long-range plan for a higher level of safety should include improved auto crashworthiness, occupant restraint systems, and vehicle designs to mitigate pedestrian injuries, as well as the elimination of roadside hazards.



Photo credit: Sylvia Johnson, 1979

Crash barrier (foreground) provides some protection for motorists switching from interstate to local road