

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 1, 1976

Forwarded to:

Honorable James B. Gregory
Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety
Administration
400 Seventh Street, S. W.
Washington, D. C. 20590

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-76-2 through H-76-5

About 1:45 a.m. on March 9, 1975, near Tracy, California, three teenagers were killed when their auto struck the side of the leading car of a slow-moving freight train at a crossing used irregularly by trains. The presence of the crossing was indicated by warning signs 500 feet and 380 feet in advance of the crossing and by crossbucks at the crossing; a train flagman present at the crossing was unsuccessful in his attempts to stop the automobile. The driver's blood alcohol level was 0.14 percent and the passengers' blood alcohol levels were 0.10 and 0.09 percent. According to California State and to Federal criteria, a person with a blood alcohol level of 0.10 percent is presumed to be under the influence of alcohol.

Three elements related to this accident are of concern to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. These elements are the need to develop and implement (1) railroad traffic information and control systems that recognize and attempt to deal with the impaired driver, (2) young driver behavior monitoring and rehabilitation programs, and (3) appropriate youth-oriented alcohol safety action programs.

In an effort to find ways to prevent or to reduce the severity of this type accident, the National Transportation Safety Board considered existing traffic information and control measures. However, due to a lack of research regarding the effectiveness of signals and systems in use and a lack of research to develop such systems with respect to controlling the impaired driver, it was not possible to predict which if any improvements in traffic information and control systems might serve to achieve appropriate reactions from impaired drivers.

Specific focus on the development of hand or portable signaling standards that recognize the need to deal with the impaired driver could benefit a number of segments of the transportation industry. Increased protection and control would result not only at railroad crossings but also at highway construction areas, accident scenes, or any site involving the temporary direction of traffic. While it is recognized that it is difficult to design for the impaired driver, it is especially necessary in situations where persons are directly exposed to this type of driver as a result of being required to provide temporary protection and control at some location.

The NHTSA has and continues to focus considerable attention on detecting, retarding, and correcting aberrant driver behavior, especially with respect to alcohol abuse. Also, the NHTSA continues to focus attention on examining alternative approaches in these areas, rather than reaching a firm decision as to what current model programs, legislative and administrative authorities might represent effective programs to pursue nationally.

In 1971, the Safety Board recommended that NHTSA consider expanding its Highway Safety Program on Driver Licensing "to provide for a 2-year period of probationary licensing for drivers under 21, during which time they would be expected to demonstrate the achievement of competence and maturity in driving. Such provisional licensing would facilitate suspension for cause and placement of mildly errant drivers into improvement programs before poor behavior and attitudes become habitual."^{1/} A program of this type has been employed by the State of New York since 1965 with demonstrated effectiveness. In this regard, it has also been noted that NHTSA recently has awarded a contract which in part would reexamine the feasibility of placing mildly errant drivers with a reasonable probability for combining drinking and driving into improvement programs. The Safety Board also understands that (1) NHTSA currently refers the States to the Uniform Vehicle Code as established by the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances for more specific guidance regarding driver licensing, (2) revision of the current NHTSA standard could be delayed for several years, and (3) the present NHTSA philosophy is that the next revision of the standard will not refer the States to

^{1/} National Transportation Safety Board Special Study, "Youth and Traffic Safety Education," July 1, 1971, NTSB-STS-71-3.

the Uniform Vehicle Code and will not include specific programs of the type suggested by the Board. The scope and magnitude of the young driver safety problem are such that specific guidance should be provided at an early date.

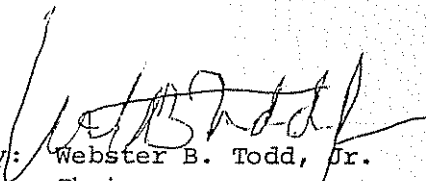
In 1971, the Safety Board also recommended that NHTSA "develop new and/or supplemental efforts in their alcohol safety action programs specifically designed for the young drinking driver, beyond those now contemplated or in use." The effectiveness of early efforts in this regard could not be established by NHTSA. Now it appears that NHTSA is initiating a second series of programs which will focus primarily on the young problem drinker and that the initiation of these programs is being delayed even though this is a recognized priority area. The Safety Board is concerned that these programs will follow a pattern similar to the Alcohol Safety Action Programs that focus on the apprehended offender, whereas an effort should be pursued that would encompass all aspects of young driver improvement in relation to combined drinking and driving.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

1. Determine and report the effectiveness of traffic information and control systems currently in use at railroad crossings, considering in particular their ability to warn and achieve an appropriate reaction from impaired drivers. (H-76-2) (Class II, Priority Followup)
2. Develop and report more effective systems and standards for conveying traffic information to impaired drivers at temporary traffic control sites (e.g., railroad crossings, construction sites, etc.) and protecting those persons controlling traffic. (H-76-3) (Class II, Priority Followup)
3. Study the effectiveness of the several forms of probationary licenses already in effect for young drivers, devise and incorporate model guidelines, and insure their rapid implementation into its Highway Safety Program Standard on Driver Licensing. (H-76-4) (Class II, Priority Followup)
4. Initiate promptly programs which emphasize youth-oriented Alcohol Safety - Driver Improvement programs. These programs should be directed not only toward the apprehended offender,

but also toward the driver with a history of mildly errant behavior and a reasonable probability for combining drinking and driving. (H-76-5) (Class II, Priority Followup)

TODD, Chairman, McADAMS, THAYER, BURGESS, and HALEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations.


By: Webster B. Todd, Jr.
Chairman

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