Insights and opportunities for transportation and public health agency collaboration to improve road safety across the U.S.

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NHTSA NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION

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Background

In 2021, more than 40,000 people died on U.S. roads, representing a 10.5% increase from the year before and the highest number of deaths since 2005 (NHTSA, 2022). Recognizing the urgency of this problem, transportation professionals across the U.S. have called for a new, holistic approach to transportation safety, called a Safe System approach, which incorporates critical system redundancies to ensure that no crash results in serious injury or loss of life. Integral to this approach is multidisciplinary partnership, including a specific and recurring call for increased public health integration in transportation safety efforts.

US Department of Transportation

Aims

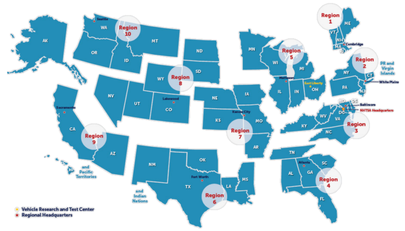
To understand and advance public health and transportation collaboration efforts in the U.S., the purpose of this project was to identify core themes and opportunities for increased public health and transportation coordination and partnership.

Methods

We used a mixed methods approach of key informant interviews (N = 7) with transportation leaders representing different regions of the U.S., combined with a systematic analysis of all state highway safety plans (HSPs) for the year 2023 (N = 57 and included plans from all states, territories, the District of Columbia, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs).

Key informant interviews were conducted between June-August 2022, and results were used to inform development of a detailed coding tool to assess presence of several public health-related elements in the plans. Elements included:

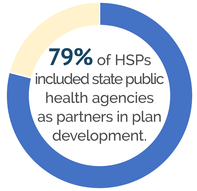
- types of health-related stakeholders involved in plan development,
- integration of equity within plan framing and activities,
- coordination between public health and transportation partners in data analyses used to inform and evaluate programmatic efforts, and
- presence of public health partner engagement and collaboration in transportation safety interventions and activities.

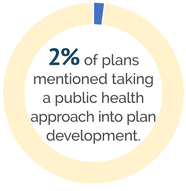


Results

The key informant interviews revealed three key thematic areas for increased public health and transportation agency collaboration:

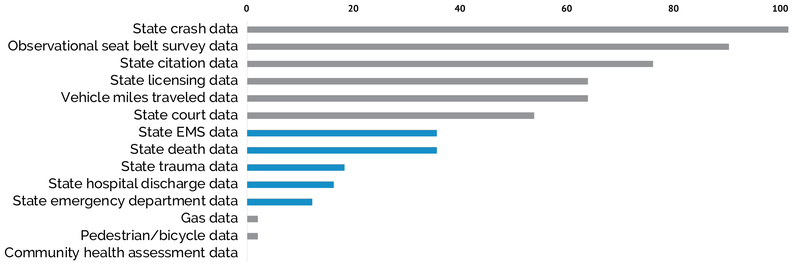
Analyses of HSPs found that more than three-quarters of plans noted state public health partner involvement in plan development; however, only one plan mentioned taking a public health approach or integrating public health frameworks in plan development.



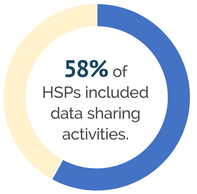


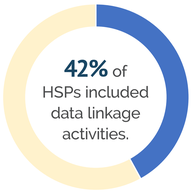
Moreover, while states generally used traditional transportation data sources to assess burden and develop performance measures, less than a third of states utilized health data sources.

Percentage of plans using state and local data sources (N = 57)



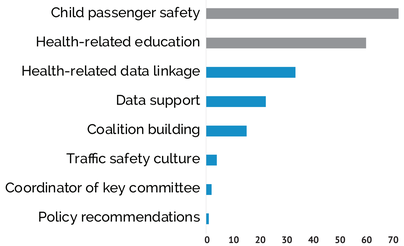
More than half of plans included data sharing activities between health and transportation partners as a key activity while close to half of plans included linking health and crash data sources.





Finally, nearly all plans included some proposed collaboration between health and transportation partners in terms of programmatic activities; however, many of the activities fell into a few traditional buckets (e.g., child passenger safety seat distribution, educational programs) and fewer fell into the more systems-level, public health activities (e.g., program evaluation, data access and analysis, coalition-building, traffic safety culture, or policy work).

Counts of programmatic activities including health partners



Conclusions

While public health partners have some presence in state transportation safety efforts, current transportation safety programming often fails to fully leverage public health concepts and expertise. Public health professionals as transportation safety partners represent a unique opportunity to improve the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and for advancing robust, diverse safety data systems.

Next steps for this project will involve identifying leading examples of promising cross-sector partnerships across the US to participate as pilot sites for a training and peer support program to increase collaboration between public health and transportation with the goal of improving road safety. The program content will focus on the three priority areas identified. If you would like to receive updates about the project or would be interested in learning more about becoming a pilot site, please visit our site using the QR code below.

References

National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2022, May). Early estimates of motor vehicle traffic fatalities and fatality rate by sub-categories in 2021 (Crash•Stats Brief Statistical Summary. Report No. DOT HS 813 298). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

https://www.hsrc.unc.edu/our-work/adopting-a-ph-approach/

This project was supported by a grant from the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration