



Outdoor Advertising Association of America

Crash Data – Important or Irrelevant?

Background

Researchers use various methods to analyze traffic safety. Two key research methods are:

- “Human factors,” i.e. what affects driver behavior
- Accident reports (crash data)

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) is conducting driver tests as part of its overall review of digital billboards and traffic safety. An outside consultant working for the government on this project (Jerry Wachtel of Berkeley, CA) has questioned the value of accident data. He says that not all accidents are reported and that accidents are caused by multiple factors. However, in public testimony, Wachtel has created a misleading impression that government is no longer studying accidents.

The Facts

On the contrary, the government relies on crash data to make decisions, allocate resources, and frame regulation; and it continues to invest millions in data collection improvements. Thanks to greater uniformity and advanced technology, data quality has significantly improved.

- *“Traffic records data are the basis for defining, managing, and evaluating traffic safety activities and performance.”* National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, National Center for Statistics and Analysis, Statement of Purpose.
- *“Crash data is a critical element in our efforts to reduce motor vehicle crashes and fatalities.”* Susan Kirinich of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, April 28, 2010.
- *“Crash data are very important to FMCSA (Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration). It’s one of top factors we use to rate motor carriers for safety. Truck and bus companies that have a lot of crashes are much more likely to get a safety compliance review from our field staff.”* Dr. Ralph Craft, Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, June 23, 2009.
- *“Both data quality and the usefulness of the crash data in general are getting better.”* Dr. Robert A. Scopatz, Data Nexus, Inc., College Station, TX, May 7, 2009.

The 2005 federal Highway Bill (Section 2006, Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users, SAFETEA-LU) authorizes \$34.5 million a year for state grants to improve traffic safety information systems. States’ traffic records systems are rated on timeliness, consistency, completeness, accuracy, accessibility, and data integration with other information.

Traffic data analysis continues to be funded, practiced, and promoted by transportation experts. There is an abundance of evidence to indicate that it remains a relevant and vital research tool.