Measuring the value of community road safety in the safe system framework

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Abstract

The safe system approach to road safety has renewed the focus on the need for an informed and engaged community to contribute to the adoption and application of effective road safety strategies. Community road safety programs play an important role in generating the community support, partnerships and engagement in road safety that is recognised as an integral role in achieving a safe system. However, traditional evaluation efforts, which have focused primarily on delivery and processes, do not provide a complete picture of the contribution of community road safety programs in this new framework. It is timely to explore new areas of evaluation measurement, such as social capital, which can make an additional contribution to the evaluation picture for community road safety.

Keywords

Community road safety, evaluation, social capital

Introduction

In recent years there has been a paradigm shift in the approach to road safety with a change in the principles behind the prevention of road crashes (1). The safe system approach reframes the way that road safety is managed. It aims for a genuinely safe transport system that accommodates human error and does not accept that death and serious injury should be a risk when using the system (2).

Within this approach, capacity building, building community partnerships and the concept of shared responsibility are identified as key elements of a successful road safety strategy (2). These elements are well matched with the strengths of community road safety programs, which work to engage and inform communities and build road safety capacity.

The adoption of the safe system approach encourages a renewed focus on establishing meaningful evaluation measures to assess contributions towards this new framework. For community road safety programs, this will require a significant shift from the traditional approaches which have focused on delivery and processes, rather than outcomes (3). Non-traditional measures, such as social capital, may provide additional tools to create a more complete picture of the contribution of community road safety programs towards a safe system.

Focusing on the Western Australian Local Government Association’s RoadWise Program, this paper will examine the role of community road safety in the safe system framework and explore the concept of social capital as a useful evaluation tool.

WALGA’s RoadWise Program

RoadWise is the Western Australian Local Government Association’s (WALGA) Local Government and Community Road Safety Program. RoadWise was established in 1994, and has grown from small beginnings to its current structure of 11 regionally based road safety officers supported by a team of staff located centrally in Perth. While community road safety programs in Australian jurisdictions typically involve partnerships with Local Government, the RoadWise Program is unique in that it is actually delivered by the WALGA (4).
WALGA is represented on the Road Safety Council of WA and was involved in the consultation and development of *Towards Zero*, the road safety strategy for WA 2008-2020. *Towards Zero* was endorsed by the State Government in March 2009 (5). This new strategy is based on the safe system approach to road safety, and applies a long term vision of a road transport system where serious crashes are virtually eliminated (6).

The development of the new state strategy and the move towards the safe system approach instigated a review of the RoadWise Program, to ensure it remained contemporary and effective in this new framework. Traditionally the RoadWise Program has focused on the delivery of programs utilising the community development approach, working with local communities to build local ownership of road safety and develop local solutions. However to achieve a safe system and the implementation of *Towards Zero*, a new approach was required. A review of the program conducted in 2007 recommended a community organisation approach to develop an informed and motivated state wide community road safety network to enable the effective coordination and implementation of *Towards Zero* (4). This shift in focus raises the question of how to appropriately evaluate the program as a whole to reflect this change. However before this can be addressed it is important to review how community road safety programs such as RoadWise fit within the new framework of the safe system approach.

**Community road safety in the safe system framework – where does it fit?**

‘The importance of community networks and capacity to deal with road safety and other transport issues is being increasingly recognised, and aligns with changes in the way governments seek to engage with and empower communities at a broader level’

- National Road Safety Action Plan 2009 and 2010 (7)

‘A safe system approach is one where citizens demand and expect safety improvements’

- Towards Zero: Ambitious Road Safety targets and the Safe System Approach (OECD) (2)

These two quotes demonstrate that road safety capacity within the community and demand for a safe road transport system is integral to the implementation and success of the safe system approach. This is widely recognised both in Australia and in leading jurisdictions internationally (2). In Western Australia, the adoption of the *Towards Zero* strategy comes with the acknowledgment that without community and political support, along with a shared vision and commitment, the goal of a road transport system without crashes resulting in death or serious injury will not be achievable (6).

More specifically, building community understanding and support for change, fostering the concept of shared responsibility, and building community participation and capacity are identified as crucial issues for the successful implementation of the safe system approach. These are areas where community road safety programs can make a key contribution, in line with the objectives of successful community road safety programs outlined in Austroads Guide to Road Safety Part 4: Local Government and Community Road Safety (8):

- Creating an informed community – building a better understanding of the issue and the possible solutions;
- Mobilising resources to tackle road safety issues at a local level – involving local road safety stakeholders, employers, service clubs etc;
- Promoting effective action at a local level – applying state wide programs with local relevance; and
- Integrating activities – linking key stakeholders to support each others activities.

Working in a partnership approach, community road safety programs provide a ‘grass roots’ link to communities and local stakeholders to enable the building of support for a safe system and a reduction in death and serious injury (6,8).
Evaluation of community road safety

With the adoption of the safe system approach, the need for effective evaluation of community road safety programs is evident. It is readily accepted that evaluation has not been a strength of community road safety programs in the past. Traditionally evaluation has been based around processes, rather than outcomes. This can include measures such as the number of people attending an event, amount of promotional material distributed or amount of media coverage. On some occasions evaluation is extended to observable and recordable behaviours, including speed and seatbelt wearing (3).

Outcome evaluation of community road safety is more difficult and as a result is less likely to be undertaken. While the traditional process evaluation of individual community road safety projects remains relevant and necessary, there is a need to explore additional outcome evaluation measures to find a more meaningful match for community road safety programs (3). This requires an exploration of what is considered as ‘evidence’ that a road safety program is working, as this will relate directly to the evaluation measure that is utilised.

In road safety, and more broadly in health promotion, we often operate in defined parameters of what is considered good evidence that an intervention or program is effective. Increasingly there is an acknowledgment in health promotion that evidence can come from multiple sources (9). Evaluations of other broad scale community based injury prevention programs have found that a narrow view of success (for example, using only the criteria of reduction in hospitalised injuries) did not account for other broader measures of success, such as perceptions of safety or increased community capacity to address safety issues (10). In road safety terms, the most clear cut evidence that programs are effective is a reduction in crashes. However evaluating community road safety according to this outcome is problematic, given the difficulty in separating the effect of program initiatives from other activities such as state wide advertising or police enforcement. The relatively small number of crashes in any specific community can also mean that conducting reliable evaluation and determining statistically significant findings is difficult (8). In simple terms of cause and effect, if it can not be demonstrated that community road safety programs in isolation have a direct effect on the number of crashes, then we need to explore what else can be considered evidence in a field that relies heavily on evidence based practice.

Successful community road safety involves multiple interventions and activity generated across a large network, along with advocacy, promotion and capacity building activities. This takes place across multiple communities, in conjunction with the activities of other road safety agencies on an ongoing basis (9). Given this broad range of strategies and target groups, it seems rational to also view the evidence of success broadly. There is no silver bullet or single outcome measure that will adequately reflect the value of community road safety programs, but we do need to move beyond the traditional approaches to evaluation and incorporate the full range of contributions of community road safety to the creation of a safe system. It is still appropriate to monitor fatal and serious injury crashes as a partner in the implementation of Towards Zero and the safe system approach. However the value of other measures such as social capital, not traditionally used in a road safety sense, should be considered in addition to the program delivery and process evaluation that is already common practice in community road safety programs (8).

Social capital – what is it?

Social capital is growing in recognition as an important concept in the health and wellbeing of communities (11, 12). While it remains a relatively new concept in road safety, it is becoming commonplace in many other areas of government policy and practice (8).

While there is no set definition of the concept, a review of the literature finds a general acknowledgment that social capital includes elements of social connectedness and cohesion, social relations and engagement, trust, reciprocity and participation in a community (11, 14, 15). The OECD (15) defines social capital as “the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of societies that enable people to co-ordinate action to achieve desired goals”. Putman (16) identifies social capital as “features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit”. In simple terms, social capital could be described as the glue that holds a community
together and enables collective actions which benefit the community. The presence of social capital makes it more likely that individuals will participate in activities which will benefit their whole community (14).

Social capital can be considered in different models or constructs. It can be viewed as structural or cognitive, with the structural component incorporating networks and linkages and the cognitive component including the concepts of trust, support and reciprocity (11). Social capital can also encompass the links within and between communities or social institutions. In this model, bonding or micro level social capital concerns the social cohesion and integration within a group, while bridging or macro level social capital includes links across communities (11, 12).

**Challenges and opportunities**

As a developing concept in the road safety arena, many questions remain about how and where social capital could be measured in the community road safety context. One of the challenges is defining the nature and boundaries of a community (10, 17). In the community road safety context the community could be defined as the community road safety network - a group of stakeholders, organisations, community groups and individuals who are involved in road safety. Measuring social capital in the network will provide a strong indication of the success of community road safety programs in engaging, mobilising, empowering and building the capacity of the community road safety network and, in doing so, contributing to a safe system.

Tools and instruments have been developed and implemented in other settings which may provide a starting point for the exploration of social capital in community road safety. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has developed a framework and indicators to measure social capital, and a range of systems and methods for the measurement of community partnerships and empowerment are already in use in other fields (18, 19). Other tools, such as Social Network Analysis, can be utilised to represent the level social capital generated amongst a network (20).

For the RoadWise Program, there is significant potential in investigating these approaches further. Identifying, adapting and developing an appropriate measurement tool to capture the level of social capital generated by the Program will continue to build the case for community road safety to be recognised as an integral component of the safe system approach in Western Australia. If social capital becomes a measurable outcome to add to the range of deliverables that are already required, it will provide additional direction to the Program and strengthen the case for ongoing funding. Building partnerships and supporting the road safety network are already integral parts of the work that the RoadWise Program undertakes, but often there is a perception that this work is under-recognised. Finding a way to measure this critical area of work will renew the focus in this key area of the program, and provide important feedback to both internal and external stakeholders.

**Conclusion**

The literature reviewed for this paper finds that the key elements of social capital - participation, reciprocity and building networks - are well matched with the role of community road safety programs in the safe system framework. However it is important to recognise that the measurement of social capital alone will not provide a complete picture of the contribution of community road safety programs. Adding social capital to the mix of evaluation measures will provide a more complete picture of what is achieved by community road safety programs in the safe system context.

The broader debate about social capital will also no doubt continue, with further discussion regarding definition, measurement and relationship to health outcomes. As the concept develops further, validity and reliability in the measurement of social capital is needed to allow confidence in the results (11).

While there is more research needed in this area, it appears the measuring of social capital may provide an opportunity to explore a new way of assessing the contribution of community road safety programs such as the RoadWise Program in developing a safe road transport system for future generations.
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Abbreviations

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics
WALGA – Western Australian Local Government Association
OECD – Organisation for Economic Development and Cooperation
WHO – World Health Organisation

References


