

AGGRESSIVE DRIVERS VIEW TRAFFIC DIFFERENTLY CAPITAL BELTWAY FOCUS GROUPS FIND

Beginning in 1993, a series of major crashes on the Washington Capital Beltway focused Federal, State, and local attention on the need to further improve safety on this 64-mile interstate facility. Since then, a number of improvements have been made. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) supported the Capital Beltway Safety Team by conducting a series of studies examining crashes and assessing motorist's perceptions of the conditions on the Beltway (See *TRAFFIC TECH* 124, May 1996).

Preusser Research Group, Inc. asked motorists in eight focus groups about their reactions to recent improvements in roadway engineering, law enforcement efforts, and public information and education programs. This year, special emphasis was placed on aggressive driving behaviors. Beltway drivers participated in eight focus group discussions in the summer of 1997. Three groups were made up of the general population of drivers, two represented aggressive drivers, and three represented commercial vehicle drivers. Due to the small sample size of focus group research, findings may not be representative.

Roadway Design and Maintenance Improvements

The good news is that drivers and truckers believe that roadway design and maintenance have improved substantially. Only 33 percent in 1997 thought these features contributed to crashes while in 1994, 97 percent of the participants complained about the roadway itself. As in 1994, the single factor motorists and truckers dislike about the Beltway is congestion during peak hours.

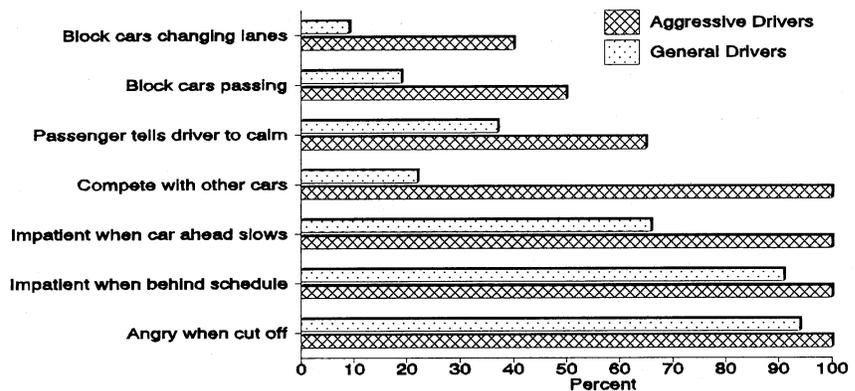
Perceived Cause of Crashes on the Beltway

Focus group participants were asked to list and then rank the things they thought contributed to crashes on the Beltway. There were remarkable differences between the 1994 and 1997 groups. Unsafe driving behaviors were among the most important factors in both years, but the 1997 participants ranked them among their top three causes twice as often as the 1994 participants did. Excessive speed, aggressive driving, inattention, unsafe lane changing, and tailgating were most frequently designated as major crash causes in the 1997 groups.

Aggressive driving was the number one concern among the general drivers in 1997, ranked among the top three causes by over half of the participants (53 percent). In 1994, only 2 percent had mentioned aggressive driving. Interesting, the aggressive driver groups were less concerned about aggressive driving but 15 percent of them mentioned aggressive driving as one of the major crash causes.

Questionnaire Responses -- General vs. Aggressive Drivers

always, often, and sometimes responses





Aggressive Drivers are Different

There was a distinct difference in the way drivers answered a battery of questions about how often they got angry, were impatient, were competitive, and punished other drivers in driving situations. Most of the drivers in the two aggressive driving focus groups confirmed that they thought of themselves as aggressive drivers at least sometimes.

..... they're more competitive

The most discriminating question was how often participants compete with other cars. Three quarters (75 percent) in the aggressive driver groups said they *always* or *often* compete while none of those in the general driver groups said they compete. One woman called driving on the Beltway "*a competitive sport.*" The aggressive groups said they more often got angry when cut off, had passengers tell them to calm down, blocked other cars trying to pass, and blocked cars trying to change lanes.

..... they blame the other driver

All drivers, whether they think of themselves as aggressive or not, uniformly blame unsafe driving on the *other driver*. General drivers expressed dismay at specific unsafe driving maneuvers -- drivers who speed, change lanes frequently, cut them off, and force their way ahead. Aggressive drivers, on the other hand, blame those who are going too slow in the passing lane and cars at the speed limit who *force* them to change lanes and weave in and out of traffic. As one woman said, "*Get out of my way, please.*"

..... they go faster

Aggressive drivers also admitted to going much faster than the other groups and said that cars going 55 mph should be in the slow lanes. They also spoke of *Left Lane Etiquette* -- "*If I'm going 80 mph in the fast lane and someone comes up behind me, I should move out of his way.*" They think slower drivers are the problem. Paradoxically, the aggressive drivers will go out of their way to block another car trying to pass or cut in front of them.

Possible Solutions to Reduce Problems

To deal with speeding problems, aggressive driving, and unsafe lane changing, Beltway drivers recommended more police presence and more enforcement campaigns like *Smooth Operator*, emphasizing unsafe driving. They supported photo radar, photo imaging aggressive drivers, speed warning devices. Some suggested higher speed limits but with zero tolerance for violators, variable speed limits according to road conditions, different speed limits for each lane, and tougher sanctions on repeat violators. They thought there should be more courtesy campaigns and education about the importance of keeping right and about the dangers of unsafe lane changes.

For a copy of *Capital Beltway Update: Beltway User Focus Groups* (55 pages plus appendices), write to the Office of Research and Traffic Records, NHTSA, NTS-31, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590, or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Linda Cosgrove, Ph.D. was the contract manager.

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