

# CRS Report for Congress

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## Aggressive Driving: Is There a Solution?

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### Summary

Courtesy on the highway has long been punctuated with a flaring of tempers and the needless exchange of obscene gestures. Although any aggression detracts from the demanding full-time job of defensive driving, these episodes usually passed without altercation. But many drivers now use their cars as weapons, or even worse, carry firearms on America's highways, purportedly for defense against aggressive drivers. Unfortunately, there appear to be few options to address this growing issue short of enacting and enforcing much more punitive measures to remind all operators that driving is a privilege, not a right. States, with the help of federal agencies, have offered insights on how to identify aggressive drivers and avoid them. Pending federal legislation (re-authorization of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, section 402) provides for cost sharing of countermeasures to address this pressing problem.

Aggressive driving is not new. In the 1950's, younger drivers played "chicken" by aiming their cars at each other to see which one would swerve first to avoid a collision. Within the last few years, however, aggressive driving has escalated, has involved older drivers, and has taken on new and deadlier proportions. For example, about one year ago, the Washington, D. C. community was stunned by the behavior of two drivers on the George Washington Parkway during morning rush hour. In an attempt to race and out-manuever each other on the highway, the two vehicles caused a four-car collision resulting in the needless deaths of three people. Although the surviving driver was sentenced to prison, he admitted no culpability during the trial. Other horror stories include exchanges of gunfire between drivers, and drivers using their vehicles as battering rams against other cars and pedestrians.

There are no accurate statistics on episodes of aggressive driving. Many pass unnoticed except for the drivers involved, do not result in traffic citations, and do not cause vehicle crashes, death, or injury. But the agency responsible for tracking these incidents (the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)) claims that aggressive driving has become one of the more pressing highway-safety issues. Before the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, House Committee on Transportation and

Infrastructure, Dr. Ricardo Martinez, director of NHTSA, testified that, during 1996, 41,907 people died and over three million more were injured in police-reported crashes. The agency estimated that about one-third of these crashes and about two-thirds of the resulting fatalities can be attributed to behavior associated with aggressive driving.<sup>1</sup>

## **What Causes Aggressive Driving**

Aggressive driving can be traced to a number of factors. The automobile appears to have become an instrument for more people, who might otherwise act courteously, to engage in this potentially lethal behavior. Automobiles can act as a “great equalizer” of all types of people.

Also, the highways are becoming more congested, which, in turn, is generating more confrontations among drivers and stretching their patience. In his testimony, Dr. Martinez stated that, since 1987, the number of miles of roads in the United States has increased only one percent while the number of vehicle miles driven has increased by 35 percent. Finally, there appears to be a correlation between aggression on the road and the consumption of alcohol or other controlled substances.

## **What Is Being Done**

NHTSA has addressed aggressive driving on several fronts by: (1) cooperating with the states to synchronize traffic signals and eliminate backups and irritating congestion; (2) cooperating on other programs to monitor traffic flow and devise technologies to move traffic more efficiently; (3) encouraging stiff penalties for aggressive driving where it can be clearly identified; (4) promoting the reduction of “blood alcohol concentration” limit (defining intoxication) from 0.1% to 0.08%; and (5) launching a public awareness program to help responsible drivers identify aggressive drivers and avoid confrontation.<sup>2</sup>

The agency has also asked for re-authorization of section 402 of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). Section 402 is designed, through cost sharing, to encourage countermeasures for aggressive and other undesirable driving. For example, the program was used in part to fund (\$100,000) the “smooth operator” initiative for suburban Washington, D.C. In addition to educating the public, NHTSA, through the 402 program, is assisting other states in identifying aggressive drivers, largely by using unmarked surveillance vehicles on the highways. At least one other state, New York, is participating in a surveillance program.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of the Honorable Ricardo Martinez, M.D., Administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration before the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, July 17, 1997, available at “<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/nhtsa/announce/testimony/aggres2.html>”

<sup>2</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, *Are You An Aggressive Driver or a Smooth Operator*, available at: “<http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/region3/aggr12.html>”