

(Abstract)

This brief sketch of some of the history of highway safety advocacy in the United States is relevant to the role of advocacy today. It shows that institutionalised advocacy, such as that promoted by the National Safety Council, was dominant for a long time, but it was largely ineffective. In contrast, the efforts of individual advocates such as Straith, Nader, Haddon, Linko, and others ultimately prevailed despite resistance by the establishment.

Does this mean individuals can be more effective than organisations or groups? The answer is no. Successful advocacy has everything to do with the ideas being promoted. “The Three Es” may have seemed reasonable (even today many people believe that countermeasures aimed at preventing crashes should have a higher priority than those aimed at reducing the consequences of crashes), but it was not effective because its focus was on ineffective approaches.

Advocacy will continue to have a role in highway safety. For it to contribute to reductions in motor vehicle crash deaths and injuries it must support countermeasures shown by good research to be effective. Yet even in highly motorised societies like the United States, strong support continues among some groups for ineffective behavioural countermeasures. The challenge for highway safety professionals is to ensure the same commitment to science-based countermeasures for human factors problems that now exists for problems associated with vehicle and highway factors. The education and training of advocates on what works and does not work is central to this challenge.