

Behavior Matters

The inescapable cause of traffic-related deaths lies in our own behavior. Drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists would all do much better if we ditched the cell phones, avoided the booze, and paid closer attention. For all of the demands of cities to do more to provide safer roads, more cops, and the like, we need to acknowledge that we have met the enemy, and the enemy is us.

While we all play a role, the City can do better to induce safer driving. Given the shortage of enforcement resources, we need to draw more deeply on the growing field of behavioral insights to identify stimuli for better behavior. Sometimes an effective “nudge” amounts to a simple reminder about the speed limit, so we’ll utilize more changeable message signs in high-risk corridors. Even without enforcement, studies show that people behave more safely when they feel they’re being observed. Deploying mobile radar speed signs in neighborhoods with a high number of complaints appears to reduce speeding.

With the approval of my March Budget Message, we’re exploring more innovative approaches to behavior modification. One partnership with the California DMV could enable the City to use license plate-reading cameras to trigger the communication of messages from the DMV to registered owners of those cars. A timely text or email can help many parents learn much more about their teenagers’ terrifying driving habits.

We’ll also be employing students this summer to build out a smartphone app to incentivize better driving for participating residents, similar to a “safest driver” program that has successfully improved driving behavior in [Boston](#), [Seattle](#), and [San Antonio](#). Those who opt-in to the program would allow their mobile phones to detect their driving speeds, harsh braking, distracted driving, and the like. Volunteers in other cities achieve [savings on insurance premiums through their participation and progress](#).

Whatever behavior we seek to influence, we’ll abide carefully by our Privacy Policy protections, and the data should help guide us. Targeting men would help, since men constitute the largest share of problematic drivers. Encouraging pedestrians to use crosswalks could help. When it comes to risky behavior, we all appear subject to these risks, and we can all participate in the solution.