



Voices from the Crosswalk: Insights from Focus Groups with School Crossing Guards

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Acknowledgements

The New Jersey Safe Routes Program, supported by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, is a statewide initiative with a mission to partner with schools and communities to prioritize and implement opportunities for people to walk, bike, or travel by other wheeled devices. By focusing on improvements to support active travel by youth, we can create safe, healthy, equitable, and appealing conditions for all.

The New Jersey Safe Routes Resource Center assists public officials, transportation and health professionals, and the general public in creating safer and more accessible walking and bicycling environments for children in New Jersey through education, training, and research.

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I. Introduction

Participants in previous direct crossing guard training in urban communities have suggested that the training material does not adequately reflect the conditions the guards face in their work. Current training videos and presentations provide information on basic crossing guard procedures, uniforms and equipment, and standards of behavior. However, when training materials do not reflect the reality of the crossing guard's experience, the training audience may discount the training materials. In 2024, Rutgers–VTC held focus groups with Crossing Guards to explore conditions “on the street” and to help determine what additional information, visuals, or other adjustments to the standard training materials would be helpful.



New Brunswick, NJ

II. Focus Groups

An opportunity to conduct a focus group presented itself in coordination with direct training held in North Bergen, New Jersey, on April 1, 2024. While specific visual materials were not ready for the first focus group, following the training presentation in North Bergen, staff transitioned into a focus group discussion with the assembled crossing guards.

Crossing Guards were asked:

1. Do the training materials adequately reflect the conditions you face in your work?
2. Do you have concerns that are not reflected in the training material?
3. What additional training materials would be helpful?

While the Crossing Guards in North Bergen generally felt that the training materials adequately reflected the conditions they faced in their work, the question regarding concerns not reflected in the training material resulted in a more robust conversation. The North Bergen Crossing Guards highlighted the following issues and concerns that they face:

- Drivers, including parents and teachers, ignore crossing guards.
- Parking or dropping children on or near crosswalks or too close to corners.
- Delivery trucks (UPS, Amazon, etc.) block ramps and crosswalks.
- Heavy traffic with few breaks makes gap assessment difficult.
- Speeding, distracted driving, and near misses.
- Signal timing issues result in long crossings with insufficient time to cross.

Following the initial focus group, Rutgers-VTC coordinated with Civic Eye Collaborative to develop visual resources based on this initial feedback to be integrated into a presentation for additional focus group attendees to respond to. Using video clips and photographs, the concerns raised by the crossing guards in North Bergen were visualized to start a discussion among crossing guards at two additional focus groups held in Trenton, New Jersey, on August 27, 2024, and in Passaic, New Jersey, on August 29, 2024.



III. Crossing Guard Concerns

At the focus groups held in Trenton and Passaic, the assembled crossing guards were shown the issues and concerns identified by the North Bergen crossing guards, which were visualized through photos and short video clips. The following summarizes their feedback related to each issue:

Drivers, including parents and teachers, ignore crossing guards.

Crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic agreed that drivers ignoring crossing guards was a big concern in their communities. The Crossing guards in Trenton felt that the drivers that disrespected them were from all sectors of the community. In contrast, the crossing guards in Passaic felt that parents dropping off and picking up their children from school were especially problematic, with one guard noting, “Parents are the worst, such bad behavior! They set a terrible example.”

Parking or dropping children on or near crosswalks or too close to corners.

Related to the concerns expressed above, Crossing Guards in Trenton and Passaic also agreed that parents or guardians parking or dropping children on or near crosswalks or too close to corners is a primary concern. One guard in Passaic noted that “this is so common; it happens every day.”



Highland Park, NJ

Delivery trucks (UPS, Amazon, etc.) block ramps and crosswalks.

Crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic also agreed with the North Bergen crossing guards that delivery trucks blocking crosswalks, ramps, and curbs were a consistent concern at their crossings. While the deliveries tended to be short, this illegal parking often disrupted their crossings, decreased visibility, and generally decreased safety. While multiple offenders, including UPS and the post office, were noted, crossing guards in all three cities agreed that Amazon delivery drivers are the worst and most frequent offenders.

Heavy traffic with few breaks makes gap assessment difficult.

Heavy traffic was also a concern in Trenton and Passaic. In Passaic, they also elaborated that traffic caused by congestion is a problem. The guards reported that the heavy traffic is often stopped over crosswalks and is usually bumper to bumper during arrival and dismissal, especially in the morning. They noted that this stopped traffic makes it difficult to cross children safely because their crosswalks are often blocked, and it is difficult to tell when traffic will start moving again. The crossing guards also noted that the heavy traffic and congestion usually result in bad behavior as drivers try to keep moving or avoid traffic, and parents drop children in unsafe places to avoid waiting longer.

Speeding, distracted driving, and near misses.

Speeding, distracted driving, and near misses were described as frequent occurrences in Trenton in Passaic and North Bergen. The crossing guards in Passaic felt that "distracted driving" wasn't the correct term for their experience and that "distraction" wasn't the real issue. These crossing guards thought that the speeding, near misses, and other bad behavior were deliberate actions. One guard noted, "It seems like they just don't care."



Highland Park, NJ

Signal timing issues result in long crossings with insufficient time to cross.

Signal timing issues seemed to be of most significant concern in North Bergen. While crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic agreed that this could be a concern, it was not something they seemed to relate to as much and did not generate much conversation.

Following the initial discussion based on the issues and concerns identified by the Crossing Guards in North Bergen, the crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic were asked to identify any other problems or concerns that they have that are not reflected in the training material. The additional issues and concerns they noted are discussed below:

Older students don't listen to crossing guards.

Crossing guards reported that older students, mostly middle- or high-school-aged children, often ignore them. These older students cross at other locations or do not obey the instructions of the crossing guards. They reported doing their best to encourage the students to cross with them but are unsure what else they can do. While crossing guards in Passaic agreed with these sentiments, this was a more significant concern in Trenton, where it was first brought up.

Children on bicycles don't listen to crossing guards.

Following up on the point made above, the crossing guards in Trenton noted that there is also a problem getting children on bicycles to listen to them or to obey safe crossing procedures. The crossing guards in Trenton reported that students do not get off their bikes for the crossing, as recommended in best practices. One guard in Trenton noted, "I do my best to keep them safe. They won't get off their bikes, but when I see them coming, I stop traffic so that they can cross safer."

Cars and trucks are getting larger, and it is increasingly intimidating to try to get the drivers of these large vehicles to stop.

While large trucks were first noted in North Bergen, concerns regarding the size of regular passenger vehicles emerged in Passaic. A long-term crossing guard in Passaic started the conversation by stating that "cars and trucks seem so much bigger these days." Her peers agreed with her and noted that they are concerned that drivers of these large vehicles have more difficulty seeing them and seeing the children they cross. One guard said they were worried that people rely too much on technology for safety and aren't looking at the road and their surroundings as well as they should be.

Red light running has seemed to increase.

Crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic reported noticing increased red light running in the past few years. Long-term guards reported that this was much less common when they first started, but they now see multiple vehicles running red lights daily, and they have to be extra careful when initiating stops. One guard in Trenton reported that "people run red lights like they don't exist."

Verbal abuse has become more common.

Crossing guards in Trenton and Passaic agreed that they have seen an increase in verbal abuse in recent years. A crossing guard in Passaic felt it was because "people just don't want to stop." Long-time crossing guards in both cities reported that last year was the worst year they have ever seen for verbal abuse, with a guard in Trenton noting that it "is so much worse than it used to be." Another crossing guard in Trenton reported, "I am constantly disrespected and told to 'get a real job.'" A crossing guard in Passaic noted, "Last year, I was even threatened. It never used to be this bad."

IV. Discussion for Practice

During the focus groups, the crossing guards we spoke with identified various concerns that impact their job performance. Concerns that seemed more problematic for crossing guards in urban communities included:

- Delivery trucks (UPS, Amazon, etc.) block ramps and crosswalks.
- Heavy traffic with few breaks makes gap assessment difficult.
- Signal timing issues result in long crossings with insufficient time to cross.

While these concerns could impact crossing guards in any environment, these specific concerns are likely to be more common and have a more significant impact in denser, more urban communities. Additional training information and advice for dealing with these situations, included in crossing guard training or supplemental training materials, could help crossing guards in urban communities better prepare for these situations.

Many of the other concerns that were noted in the focus groups have been reported as common throughout the state in many types of communities, from crossing guards and crossing guard supervisors during Train the Trainer classes, direct crossing guard training, and through "help desk" requests at the NJ Safe Routes Resource Center. There is a common theme among many of these more universal concerns that were noted, including:

- Drivers, including parents and teachers, ignore crossing guards.
- Parking or dropping children on or near crosswalks or too close to corners.
- Speeding, distracted driving, and near misses.
- Older students don't listen to crossing guards.
- Red light running has seemed to increase.
- Verbal abuse has become more common.

These concerns demonstrate that crossing guards face a near-daily lack of respect while serving at their posts. They report that older students disregard them, adults ignore them, and impatient motorists practice unsafe behaviors that put them and the students they cross at risk. Most troubling, they report that parents of school children and even classroom teachers often cause problems. In short, bad behavior by members of the public is making it more difficult for crossing guards to keep children and themselves safe.

While correcting "bad behavior" is often thought of as a job for Police Officers, simply saying that we need to enhance enforcement to combat bad behavior is not enough. Police Officers have a challenging and demanding job and can't be everywhere in their community at once to support enhanced enforcement. While targeted enforcement campaigns may be effective, other interventions must also be paired with enforcement.

V. Resources targeted at “Safe Driving”

Unlike most of the New Jersey Crossing Guard Training and Resources program materials, which are aimed directly at educating crossing guards or providing resources for Police supervisors, these resources would be aimed at members of the general public, encouraging them to drive safely, obey traffic laws, pass people safely, allow extra travel time, be aware of their surroundings and exercise patience while driving, especially in school zones. While there are already many social media campaigns directed toward the general public to encourage safe driving, there is a need for materials that can be customized and shared more locally. Draft materials, including video clips, social media toolkits, graphics, and fact sheets, could be customized to target a safe driving appeal

to a specific community. These materials could be targeted directly at teachers and parents through partnerships with schools, and they could be targeted at the broader community through municipal outreach and partnerships with local organizations.

VI. Resources targeted at respecting crossing guards

While resources encouraging safe driving offer value, there also needs to be a targeted effort to get to the heart of the issues identified by so many crossing guards, such as a lack of respect for them and what they do. To help counteract this lack of respect, resources such as videos, social media toolkits, graphics, and fact sheets could be developed to directly highlight why crossing guards are so important, highlight best safety practices, and spotlight activities and practices to be avoided to help keep crossing guards and the students they cross safe. Because crossing guard appreciation programs are much less common, sharing these materials with a broad audience would be beneficial. Additionally, draft materials



could be developed that could be customized and targeted to individual communities and specifically to parents and teachers through schools. The resulting materials could also be shared with and promoted for use by Police Officers, municipalities, advocates, and statewide and local safety partners.

VII. Resources and opportunities to target greater public involvement with crossing guards

Students disrespecting crossing guards is not a new issue. Many years ago, a crossing guard in New Jersey reported that on a near daily basis, children on school buses threw garbage at her out of the bus windows while she was at her post. While she made it a point to get to know the students she crossed each day, she had never met the students on the bus. Her solution to help stop this abusive behavior was to get permission to go into the school and speak with all the children as part of a morning assembly event. She reported that after she had visited the school and introduced herself to all of the children, there was a decline in the garbage throwing. Her theory is that after meeting her, it was harder for the children on the buses to not see her as a real person and somebody that they knew.

The experiences of this particular crossing guard have inspired this final suggestion. Crossing guards might be able to help curb aggressive and abusive behavior through increased opportunities for public involvement. Crossing guard supervisors could foster increased public involvement through crossing guard appreciation events. Additionally, draft fliers, speaking points, or other resources could be created for use directly by crossing guards. Crossing guards could use these materials to meet with parents at back-to-school nights, school carnivals, or other school or municipal community events. Fostering a connection between the greater community and the crossing guards that serve them could result in students, parents, teachers, and other community members showing their crossing guards a greater degree of respect.





Montclair, NJ