

Introduction to Road Safety Assessments

What is a Road Safety Assessment?

Road Safety Assessments (RSAs), also referred to as Road Safety Audits in safety literature, are a proactive approach to improving road safety. An RSA is a formal assessment of the safety performance of an existing or planned road segment or an intersection. It is carried out by an independent multidisciplinary RSA Team that typically consists of representatives from local law enforcement, road safety education, road/traffic engineering, emergency medical response, and an expert in human factors. The step-by-step procedure of an RSA can be performed during any or all stages of a project, including planning, preliminary or final design, traffic control planning, construction, pre-opening, and on existing roads. They can also be used on any sized project from minor intersection and roadway retrofits to large transportation projects. An RSA can be a tool for public agencies to improve road safety and communicate to the public on how the agency is proactively addressing road safety concerns.

The aim of an RSA is to answer the following questions:

- What elements of the road may present a safety concern: to what extent, to which road users, and under what circumstances?
- What opportunities exist to eliminate or mitigate identified safety concerns?

The benefits of RSAs are that they:

- May help produce designs that reduce the number and severity of crashes
- May reduce costs by identifying safety issues and correcting them before projects are built
- Help promote awareness of safe road design practices
- Help integrate multimodal road safety concerns
- Help identify key human factor considerations

Who else is doing RSAs?

It is relatively recently that public agencies in the United States have begun to focus on RSAs. Several US states have begun to incorporate RSAs along with their existing efforts to improve road safety. However, RSAs have been applied successfully in countries such as England, Australia and New Zealand since the 1990s. The RSA concept has proven to be highly effective in these countries for identifying and reducing crash risks on public roads. The European Union now has a RSA requirement for all roads in EU nations. A program by Pennsylvania DOT has successfully implemented RSAs in the design phase. The New York DOT has integrated RSAs within their pavement overlay program. The Iowa DOT has implemented RSAs in resurfacing projects. An RSA program launched by the Arizona DOT in 2006, has led to a number of RSAs across the state. The state's 2007 Strategic Highway Safety Plan includes RSAs. The 2005 MAG Strategic Transportation Safety Plan also identified RSAs as a strategy to improve road safety.

Will performing RSAs increase the risk of litigation for public agencies?

Although some concerns have been raised that the use of RSAs would increase an agency's liability, experience in the US and elsewhere have shown that the opposite is true. Implementing RSAs to reduce the crash potential and improve the overall safety performance is considered a proactive approach to safety that should be used in defense of tort liability. This is particularly true of RSAs performed in the early stages of a project. Identifying and documenting safety issues on an existing roadway are not an admission of guilt. Rather, it is the first step in a process designed to improve safety. Proper documentation, communication and logical prioritization of an agency's plan to address safety issues would be difficult to fault. Evidence of RSAs, such as the written report and response to the report, could be used as part of a risk management program to show that a state or locality is exercising good faith in managing its liabilities and risks. It is recommended that, prior to undertaking RSAs, local agency staff consult with the agency's attorneys/risk management.

“If folks keep to their mission to provide safe roads, then part of that would be having audits and checks to make sure that if we have problems, we can identify them and address them” a quote from Steven LaMar, a Senior Litigation Counsel for the Arizona Office of the Attorney General, cited in a brochure on RSA's published by Federal Highway Administration.

Steps involved in performing an RSA?

