

Is speeding a “real” antisocial behavior? A comparison with other antisocial behaviors

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Abstract

The relationship between speed and crashes has been well established in the literature, with the consequence that speed reduction through enforced or other means should lead to a reduction in crashes. The extent to which the public regard speeding as a problem that requires enforcement is less clear. Analysis was conducted on public perceptions of antisocial behaviors including speeding traffic. The data was collected as part of the British Crime Survey, a face-to-face interview with UK residents on issues relating to crime. The antisocial behavior section required participants to state the degree to which they perceived 16 antisocial behaviors to be a problem in their area. Results revealed that speeding traffic was perceived as the greatest problem in local communities, regardless of whether respondents were male or female, young, middle aged, or old. The rating of speeding traffic as the greatest problem in the community was replicated in a second, smaller postal survey, where respondents also provided strong support for enforcement on residential roads, and indicated that traveling immediately above the speed limit on residential roads was unacceptable. Results are discussed in relation to practical implications for speed enforcement, and the prioritization of limited police resources.

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1. Introduction

Within professional circles the overall relationship between speed and road crashes is uncontroversial (e.g., Aarts and van Schagen, 2006; Finch et al., 1994; Richter et al., 2006). One conclusion that obviously follows is that speed reduction, for example through enforcement, should be effective in reducing crashes. One conclusion that does not obviously follow is the extent to which the public regard speeding as a problem that merits enforcement. It is likely that an effective overall strategy will require not only effective speed enforcement but also a public that is concerned about speeding. We will argue that without the latter, policy makers may not sanction the former. At a practical level winning public support is a critical factor in successful speed enforcement programs (Delaney et al., 2005b).

One efficient enforcement strategy has been the use of cameras that automatically record speed choices. The use of safety cameras to enforce speed limits has become common in some parts of the world (Delaney et al., 2005b). For example, in Eng-

land and Wales 91% of speeding offences are now detected by cameras (Fiti and Murray, 2006). Cameras also have demonstrable safety benefits in terms of both vehicle speed reduction and crash reduction (Chen et al., 2000; Gains et al., 2005; Retting and Farmer, 2003). Despite the scientific evidence to support the use of automated speed enforcement, there has been considerable public debate. The importance of this debate has been witnessed in Canada, where an automated speed enforcement program in British Columbia was terminated following lobbying by interest groups (Delaney et al., 2005a).

1.1. Media representation of speeding

In some countries where the use of cameras has been common, such as in Britain, there has been a discrepancy between the national and local newspaper coverage. The reporting of cameras in the local community where the camera has been placed has generally been more positive than in the national newspapers (Delaney et al., 2005a). For example, some parts of the national media in Britain have taken an anti-camera stance, with continuing criticisms that the motorist is being targeted rather than ‘real criminals’. In the Daily Mail newspaper the shadow Home Secretary, David Davis, was quoted saying, “This huge increase

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in summary motoring offences shows the police are focusing too much on motorists and not enough on catching serious criminals. This has to change” (Slack and Massey, 2005). In the *Telegraph*, former Home Office minister, Anne Widdicombe, was reported to argue for police prioritizing tackling burglars and other criminals, rather than pursuing motorists, and was quoted to say, “If police pull over a motorist for hogging a middle lane, they may well be asked about the progress they have made finding the burglar that visited the motorist’s house. It would be a legitimate question, given that the police have limited resources, and have to prioritize their work” (Day, 2004). Newspaper columnists often use their platform to further the notion that the motorist is unfairly penalized, “The police can’t catch criminals. So they criminalize motorists instead . . . the two million drivers who get done every year are the poor saps who do everything that society asks them to—apart from keeping to often absurdly low speed limits . . . why are the police treating the average motorist as a criminal? Because catching real criminals is beyond them” (Parsons, 2003).

1.2. Public attitudes to speeding and automated speed enforcement

In other areas of national debate, research shows that news media exerts a considerable influence on the formation of public opinion (e.g., Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). While national media has tended to claim that speeding is less serious in relation to other crimes, and is largely anti-speed enforcement, it is less clear whether this accurately reflects public opinion.

In contrast to media representations, research on public attitudes towards speed and speed enforcement has, on average, been positive. In the United States, in a telephone survey of 500 residents in Washington, DC, 9 months after the start of a speed camera enforcement program, residents were asked whether they thought speeding drivers were a problem in the district (Retting, 2003). Results showed that almost two-thirds of residents felt speeding motorists were a problem (64%), with a greater percentage of drivers aged 60 years and older perceiving speeding motorists as a problem (81%) than drivers aged 30–59 (65%) and 18–29 (52%). With regards to speed enforcement, other telephone surveys of communities where photo-radar enforcement had been conducted or was being proposed revealed that public acceptance of cameras was just under 60%, with disapproval at around 35–40% (Freedman et al., 1990; Lynn et al., 1992). In the Lynn et al. (1992) study, a greater percentage of females (73.2%) reported approval for the proposed enforcement than males (54.3%). Retting (2003) notes that overall support for speed cameras (51%) was lower in his study than in the Freedman et al. (1990) and the Lynn et al. (1992) studies, but explains that this could in part be explained by a relatively high percentage of respondents (56%) who had received, or knew someone who had received a speeding ticket since the cameras were in operation. Overall the Freedman et al. (1990) study reported only 2–5% of drivers had received a ticket in the previous 3 years, and in the Lynn et al. (1992) study the speed cameras were not yet installed.

As previously mentioned, automated speed enforcement is more widespread in Australia and Europe than in North America, and public opinion surveys have largely focused on attitudes towards speed enforcement. Telephone surveys of Australians have found a majority support (over 85%) for at least no change or an increase in current levels of speed enforcement (Pennay, 2005; Mitchell-Taverner et al., 2003). Pennay (2005) found that more females (46%) than males (31%) supported an increase in the level of enforcement, and, less expected, more support for an increase in enforcement by 15–24-year-olds (43%), compared to the 25–39-year-olds (39%), the 40–59-year-olds (38%), and the 60+-year-olds (36%).

A European survey using face-to-face interviews on social attitudes to road traffic risk with just over 24,000 car drivers in 23 European countries found a high degree of public support for enforcement, with 76% of drivers in favor of more enforcement, and just over 60% agreeing or strongly agreeing that penalties for speeding should be more severe (SARTRE, 2004).

In Britain alone, an extensive survey of driving behavior revealed that the majority of drivers thought the 30 mph speed limit in towns were set at the correct speed (+80%), with a third of drivers thinking the 30 mph speed limit in narrow residential streets was too high (Stradling et al., 2003). Approximately 50% of drivers thought speed limits on 30 mph roads should not be broken at all, 79% thought the current penalty for speeding was about right or too lenient, and 75% supported use of speed cameras to enforce speed limits (Stradling et al., 2003). In response to claims by opponents that speed cameras are ‘deeply unpopular’, the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS, 2003) reported that opinion polls generally find widespread public support for speed cameras (e.g., Gains et al., 2005; Transport 2000, 2003). However, within government there is evidence of a persisting perception that speed cameras are controversial, with the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (2004) stating, “public attitudes to speed cameras are mixed”. The Parliamentary postnote continues, “there is widespread public and media debate about speed camera effectiveness and the motives for their use. Experience overseas indicate that public support is crucial to the success of speed camera schemes.”

1.3. Speed limit compliance

Before addressing public perception of speed, it is worth considering actual speed behavior, and levels of non-compliance on roads, in particular urban roads. Non-compliance in the following incidences refers to all vehicles traveling above the posted speed limit, regardless of whether it is a minor or major infraction. Harkey et al. (1990) assessed speed characteristics and compliance with posted limits for free-flowing vehicles on roadways from 25 to 55 mph in four US states, and found that for 30 mph roads non-compliance with the speed limit was 76%. More recently, in an investigation of the effectiveness of speed reduction techniques in high density pedestrian areas in Minnesota, USA, Kamyab et al. (2002) found that 64% of vehicles were exceeding the 30 mph speed limit prior to speed reduction interventions taking place.

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