

Introducing Speed Cameras in the ACT – How to Win Friends and Influence People

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Abstract

Speeding is a serious problem on the ACT's high quality roads, with excessive speed being a significant factor in over half Canberra's road crashes.

Given the proven record of speed cameras as a road safety measure in other Australian jurisdictions, the ACT Government introduced speed cameras in October 1999. This paper outlines the rationale, processes and results of the speed camera program since then, in terms of 'four Cs':

- Control – the research-based rationale for introduction; relevant legislation; and the best practice implementation;
- Co-operation – a partnership of the regulator (ACT Dept of Urban Services), enforcer (Australian Federal Police) and the community advocate (NRMA);
- Communication – a very thorough and open public education campaign ensured strong community support for cameras as a road safety measure; and
- Continuation – independent evaluation of the operational and road safety outcomes are being used to expand and refine the speed camera program in a best practice context.

Results after six months have been very promising, with a 26% reduction in the proportion of vehicles speeding; a 63% decrease in vehicles exceeding the limit by over 10 km/h in speed camera zones; and a 'halo effect' speed reduction of 15% on roads outside the declared speed camera network. Given this success and strong public acceptance, the speed camera program was expanded in August 2000. Mobile camera vans were increased from two to four, with the declared network going from 22 to 52 roads, mainly in residential areas.

What's the Problem?

It is no secret that Canberra has a good quality planned road network and a very high level of car use. It can even be argued that the ACT has a relatively unique road environment for Australia. Its long, wide and clear streets tend to encourage higher than desirable speeds and Canberra has modest traffic volumes, which would usually moderate speeds and discipline traffic in a city of its size.

The propensity of ACT drivers to speed is well documented. A 1998 traffic survey showed 75% of motorists regularly exceeded the speed limit by 10km/h (ACT Urban Services, 1999a, 19). An in-depth study of 61 serious crashes also found that excessive and/or inappropriate speed was a primary or aggravating factor in half the crashes investigated (Jamieson Foley & Assoc., 1995). Also, data analysis showed that while the number of crashes was declining, their severity was increasing – with speed being the most likely culprit (ACT Urban Services, 1999b).

What did we do?

This situation led to an investigation of relevant speeding countermeasures, which culminated in the introduction of speed cameras into the ACT in October 1999. This paper outlines the rationale, introduction, processes and results of the speed camera program, in terms of 'four Cs'.

1. Control

A careful introduction, utilising best practice, was the basis of the speed camera program.

By 1999 the ACT was the only Australian jurisdiction not using speed cameras. A review of their effectiveness in Australia and overseas was undertaken and confirmed cameras as a proven speeding countermeasure (ACT Urban Services, 1999a, 15-17). Being the 'newcomer' also allowed the ACT to choose elements of best practice and examine recent Tasmanian and Queensland experience with new digital speed camera technology. A four week speed camera trial was undertaken in December 1998, which confirmed the technical viability of the equipment and tested operational processes. In particular, it showed very substantial operational and cost advantages for digital cameras over wet-film alternatives.

The 1999-2000 ACT budget provided \$600,000 to fund two mobile speed cameras. Relevant legislation was passed by the ACT Legislative Assembly in August 1999 to cover speed camera operations, which included a two year 'sunset clause'.

The speed camera vans operate up to 18 hours a day, every day, and can monitor vehicles travelling in either direction. With the digital imaging, infringement adjudication is quick, cheap and effective, and infringement notices are usually posted within three days of 'capture'. Camera infringements are issued on an 'owner onus' basis, which has been very successful, with no successful court appeals to date.

Co-operation

A crucial element in implementing the speed camera program was the highly successful partnership between the regulator (ACT Urban Services); the enforcer (Australian Federal Police); and the community/road user advocate (NRMA). This focussed on three areas:

- Camera operations – Legal responsibility for camera operations rests with the ACT Chief Police Officer. However, day-to-day operation of the camera vans and infringement processing is carried out by Urban Services contract staff, with the Police allocating van sites (to link to their other traffic enforcement operations) and handling infringement appeals.
- Site selection – It was seen as critical to make the first group of sites 'bombproof' to criticism. Accordingly, the initial 27 roads were selected on the single criterion of speed-related crash record, which was easy and simple to explain to the public and media and related the cameras directly to road trauma occurrence. The sites were determined by an independent committee from Urban Services, the Police and NRMA. The latter played a very valuable role in providing independent assurance to the public of the program's road safety focus. Sites are checked for safety, operational viability and OH&S needs before approval.
- Declaration of sites – A network of 27 declared roads was announced before the camera's introduction. This played a key role in establishing the program's road safety validity with the public as it negated any criticism of covert operations.

These factors largely defused 'revenue raising' criticism, and in fact the initial public reaction frequently was 'I want a camera in my street' – albeit often for residential amenity, rather than safety, reasons.

1. Communication

A very thorough and open public education campaign ensured strong community support for cameras as a road safety measure. Most ACT residents had experienced speed cameras in other cities and survey and focus group research prior to the cameras introduction showed that the public was sympathetic to speed cameras, provided they were used for road safety; in an open manner; and not for revenue raising (Woolcott Research, 1999).

This provided a very good starting point for the public education campaign, in that ACT residents did not have to be convinced that speed cameras were necessary – rather, we only had to allay any concerns about when, where and how they would be operated.

There had been considerable ongoing (and generally very positive) media coverage of speed cameras for at least a year before their introduction. This was supplemented by a comprehensive public education program in the four weeks before and after the 'start date' of 6 October 1999. This involved radio and press advertisements; a brochure distributed to all Canberra households; media interviews and talkback; and an internet site with a map and list of the speed camera road network.

All the speed camera roads were heavily signposted with both general warning signs and additional speed limit signs. Large warning signs were also installed on Canberra's border entry roads. A prominent sign is displayed adjacent to the speed camera van during operation.

2. Continuation

Ongoing evaluation of the operational and road safety outcomes is being used to expand and refine the speed camera program in a best practice context.

With funding assistance from the NRMA-ACT Road Safety Trust, ACT Urban Services has commissioned ARRB Transport Research to undertake a two year evaluation of the speed camera program. This involves pre-introduction 'benchmarking' speed surveys, with follow-up surveys at one, 3,6, 12 and 18 months. Data is collected at a range of sites with different speed limits on the camera network and at control sites. Reports are/will be provided at the one, 6 and 18 month stages, with the final report also including crash analysis.

Results after six months have been very promising. There has been a 26% reduction in the proportion of vehicles speeding; a 63% decrease in vehicles exceeding the limit by over 10 km/h in speed camera zones; and a 'halo effect' speed reduction of 15% on roads outside the declared speed camera network.

In the first year of operation, 1,146,246 vehicles were checked by speed cameras. Of these, 24,738 vehicles (2.16%) were exceeding the speed limit and 19,703 (1.72%) issued with infringement notices. The total revenue raised from speed camera fines in 1999-2000 was \$1.195 million.

Given this success, allied to strong public acceptance of speed cameras, the program was expanded in August 2000 at a cost of \$300,000. Mobile camera vans were increased from two to four, with the declared road network going from 22 to 52 roads. A key new element was expansion of the declared road network from arterials into suburban distributor streets. Site selection criteria were expanded to include crash history, speed surveys and ACT Urban Services residential area traffic management warrants. The latter include traffic volume, land-use type, and levels of through traffic and heavy vehicles. Much less signage has been used on the new roads, with no adverse public reaction.

Conclusion

The ACT has taken advantage of new technology and best practice experience in other jurisdictions to implement a very efficient and effective speed camera program in the past 18 months. A strong partnership between the regulator, the enforcer and the community advocate to promote a simple and open program has achieved a high level of public support and good speed reduction outcomes to date.

The speed camera program is now accepted as a valuable and valid deterrent to speeding and a stable and important element of the ACT's road safety strategy. The program will be continually monitored and changed to best target changing enforcement needs and optimise road safety outcomes.

References

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Disclaimer

This paper is published in the interests of broad discussion of road safety issues, with the views expressed being those of the author.