

Community Perceptions of Speeding

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Abstract

Community perceptions and attitudes to the speeding problem are important determinants in understanding driver behaviour and provide us with critical information to both target road safety initiatives and ensure success with solutions that are palatable to the community. This paper, based on a random telephone survey of 550 respondents in NSW and the ACT, explores current and changing community attitudes towards a range of speeding and speed management issues. In doing so, it flags a number of successes, a number of areas of caution, and a number of issues requiring further attention.

Introduction

As a motoring organisation with just under two million members, one of NRMA Member Services roles is to represent the interests of motorists in NSW and the ACT. In order to do this, we must know both

- i) what motorists desire, or what they perceive is good for them, and
- ii) what motorists need, or what is demonstrated to be good for them.

While NRMA clearly has a need to value both of these perspectives as a motorists' advocate, we also believe both points to be important to the profession. Community attitudes can have as strong an influence on our success in implementing successful road safety initiatives – in forms such as self compliance and political acceptance - as the initiative itself. For example, how successful would random breath testing have been without community support and political will?

In order to understand the attitudes of motorists (remembering the same people also take on other roles such as pedestrians and parents), NRMA undertakes a number of different surveys. In this paper, I will deal specifically with the results of research undertaken during August 2000 surveying community attitudes toward a number of speeding and speed management issues.

The study was conducted by means of a series of 550 random telephone interviews amongst NSW and ACT drivers. The survey results were then weighted to represent the NSW and ACT driving population. Where possible, results were compared to a similar surveys to identify trends.

Community recognition of the speeding problem

Encouragingly, the community seems to have got the message on speeding.

The community recognises speeding as a significant contributing factor in motor vehicle crashes with just under three quarters of drivers unprompted identifying speed as “one of the main causes of car crashes.” This is in comparison to just over half identifying impaired driving and under a quarter for fatigue.

This result is also positive looking at the trend over time, increasing from 60% in 1995, to 71% in 2000. Combined with the high rate of first mention (46% compared to 8% for impaired driving and 2% for fatigue), these results demonstrate speeding is clearly top of mind as a road safety concern.

A similar dominance of speeding as a contributing factor is demonstrated when people express their concerns over road safety issues in their local area. In a research project looking into the use of insurance claims to target road safety initiatives across the Sydney metropolitan area, a supporting community survey with over 3,000 responses found 42% of concerns could be categorised as being speed related. This was clearly in front of the next categories of pedestrian safety/facilities (16%), line of sight issues (13%) and parking related concerns (13%) [McDonald, 1998].

Most in the community are also willing to advance suggestions on how to counteract speeding, with over three quarters able to volunteer ways to “reduce crashes caused by speeding.” This figure has increased from two thirds in 1995. This suggests that there is growing in-principle support to target

speeding as a legitimate road safety concern in the eyes of the community. So our question then becomes, “does the community agree on how to address this important issue?”

Agreement with strategies

In suggesting (unprompted) ways to ‘reduce crashes caused by speeding,’ most community ideas coincide with existing road safety strategies and actions. Most commonly, these ideas include improving driver education (particularly for the young or inexperienced), use of enforcement, and engineering countermeasures including appropriate speed limits or restricting the power or speed of vehicles. While the restriction of vehicle power or speed has become a more prominent idea over the past five years, the relative mention of other ideas have remained fairly constant.

Although this is obviously a biased response in terms of familiarity with existing strategies, it is at least pleasing that community ideas and opinions are not greatly divergent from those of the road safety profession.

I would now like to focus on two of these areas for the remainder of the paper. The general topics of police enforcement and speed limit issues.

Police enforcement

The survey results indicated that the community believe that all current speed enforcement methods are effective countermeasures against speeding. The most strongly supported methods are those that involve direct contact with Police officers, with motorists believing speed cameras are not as effective. Some of the reasons behind this are covered later in the paper.

Method of speed enforcement	Proportion believing effective	Proportion believing ‘very’ or ‘quite’ effective
Police on roadside with radar/lidar	88%	62%
Police mobile with radar	88%	65%
Police with roadside camera	75%	50%

While speed cameras were not seen as the most effective method of enforcement, only 10% of motorists are opposed to the use of “permanently mounted speed cameras on roads where speeding is a problem”.

In exploring these opinions further it was found that common supporting views included:

- permanent speed cameras would be a deterrent, slow motorists down and reduce crashes/casualties, if motorists are aware of them, and
- they will catch speeding (often expressed as ‘dangerous’) drivers.

50 km/h speed limits

There was continuing support for the reduction of speed limit on residential streets from 60km/h to 50km/h with 73% supportive and 23% opposed.

Common reasons expressed for this support included:

- for the safety of children,
- the slower the speed the easier it is to brake/react/avoid crashes, and
- it would be safer generally.

Other interesting views that were expressed with some frequency included ‘everyone exceeds the speed limit anyway’ and ‘a speed limit of 50 km/h really means 60 km/h.

Community support - the conditions

The devil is always in the detail! Up to this point in the paper, it appears that there is generally glowing praise for our collective efforts and position on road safety. But now we introduce some traps.

Speed cameras

Motorists have developed strong conditional support for speed cameras over the past five years. The clearest indicator is the change in support for speed cameras to be operated on all roads decreasing from

46% of all drivers down to 13% this year. This decrease coincides with increased support for much more targeted enforcement with 75% of drivers now believing cameras should be used at locations with identified speeding problems and, more dominantly, where there is a proven crash history.

Motorists are also not strong believers in the effectiveness of mailing an infringement notice after the event with most believing notices issued at the time of offence are more likely to reduce speeding. Reasons given for this include:

- Awareness and recollection of the offence,
- Greater impact on the driver due to a Police presence and more immediate 'shock' value, and
- Immediate behavioural modification with likely ongoing behavioural change for some time after.

Speed camera location and infringement processing are both clearly important issues that need to be addressed by NSW's speed camera program and any other jurisdiction working speed cameras.

Speed cameras need to be targeted at proven problem locations with this clearly communicated to and understood by the community. This is needed to ensure the greatest direct returns from immediate crash reduction and indirect returns from building community support. Rather than becoming more accepting over time and with more exposure as NRMA had originally expected to occur, the community have developed stronger opinions.

An emphasis also needs to be placed on the efficient processing of infringement notices. This is important to not only be effective in the eyes of the community, but to also minimise the negative consequences of multiple infringements being detected prior to notification of the first offence. While we might all have fantastic futuristic ideas for immediate transmission of infringements to the offending vehicle or motorist (who's seen Bruce Willis in *The Fifth Element*?!), we also need to get the basics running now with adequate resources and priority given to processing in addition to apprehension.

Speed limits

Clearly an important part of compliance with speed limits is knowing the prevailing speed limit. Assuming that we will continue to require speed limits to control speed selection, this is a fundamental basic of all speed management.

Unfortunately, however, motorists report often not knowing the prevailing speed limit. Around a third report this to occur frequently, over half not very often, and only 12% report this to occur never. This pattern was very similar to the 1995 survey result.

Frequency of not knowing speed limit	2000 survey	1995 survey
'Very' or 'Quite' often	32%	34%
Not very often	56%	50%
Never	12%	14%

Irrespective of whether this problem with speed limits is actually disguised inattentiveness while driving or purely an individual's 'moral escape,' it offers the community the ability to question the credibility of enforcement and setting of speed limits if they feel they are not provided with the ability to comply. Clearly this also strikes at the heart of the notion of a 'fair cop' and steers community perceptions straight down the dark alley of entrapment and revenue raising.

Some of the contributing factors to this position may be explained by the levels of agreement (prompted) to the statements in the following table.

Issue	Agreement (prompted)
• Speed limits too often do not match road conditions, that is, the speed limit could be higher or lower in some places	81%
• There are not enough signs or road markings to advise a driver of the speed limit	61%*
• The speed limit changes too often causing confusion for the driver	56%
• There are too many different types of speed limits that only apply on certain areas or at certain times	53%

**The comparable figure in September 1994 was 39% [NRMA, 1994].*

These results show the varied and conflicting views on speed limits. While it appears that most motorists agree with the concept of speed zoning and setting speed limits to match road conditions, clearly many of these same motorists agree that there are too many speed zones and that speed limits change too often. This is a real dilemma for our industry.

Another noteworthy result is the increased agreement with insufficient signposting and/or road markings for speed limits. Is it possible that our 'customers' have become more discerning and opinionated on this, as they have with speed cameras, or are we setting ourselves up with a more complex hierarchy of speed limits. Both scenarios are likely.

Added to this complex mix is the fact that motorists generally believe in some level of tolerance in policing speed limits, or speed 'nearly' limits.

The majority of drivers believe that they should be able to exceed the speed limit by a reasonable number of kilometres without penalty, with only a third believing the speed limit itself should be the threshold.

In a 60km/h zone, half believed 10% or more over the speed limit to be a reasonable threshold. Most, however, were within 10km/h over the speed limit.

Agreement that level is a reasonable amount over speed limit for penalty to apply*	In a 60km/h zone		In a 80km/h zone	In a 100km/h zone	
	(2000)	(1994*)	(2000)	(2000)	(1994*)
1-4km/h	47%	16%	44%	45%	12%
5-9km/h	85%	45%	79%	61%	28%
10-14km/h	97%	86%	98%	95%	77%

** 1994 survey actually asked 'how many km's over the speed limit do you think you would have to drive on a km/h road before the police would book you.'*

While the survey in 1994 phrased this question in a slightly different way, asking 'what can you get away with' rather than 'what should you get away with,' it is still interesting to compare results. Apart from assuming the interpretation of the question will be similar, we might be inclined to assume that the community is likely to be more generous with the latter. Given these assumptions it looks like a mixture of good news and bad news.

The good news is that the community seems to be becoming more focused on taking speed limits to be speed limits and less inclined to accept excessive non-compliance. The bad news is that there is still not a broad acceptance of speed limits as absolute limits and some degree of non-compliance is still perceived as a reasonable thing to do. This is obviously not what we want to hear.

While the community is blending it's own hues of grey for very black and white speed limits, there will always be some disagreement with enforcement approaches. For example, if a NSW jurisdiction were to adopt a stringent 10% tolerance policy, we can see around _ of the community potentially put off side by this 'unreasonable act' in a 60 km/h zone and similar prospects in an 80 km/h or 100 km/h zone. No doubt this 'grey' zone also contributes to the difficulty of promoting inappropriate speeding as something below the speed limit in certain situations. This is another area marked for more work required.

Combining the factors of uncertainty of the prevailing speed limit (and some disagreement with the level of speed limit), with an expectation of a 'reasonable' tolerance means our speed limit line in the sand has been distinctly smudged.

Conclusions

The most encouraging result from NRMA's surveys is that there appears to be a good recognition of speeding as a road safety problem and a community desire to address the issue.

Additionally, the in-principle agreement with the majority of speeding countermeasures provides us with reassurance that we are targeting relevant issues to maintain and build community support with more favourable attitudes emerging in recent years.

Importantly, NRMA has found that the community may be becoming more discerning on their views and imposing more conditions on their support, possibly with higher expectations of demonstrating value. This places road safety initiatives targeting speeding in a difficult position. While there appears to be basic support for targeting speeding, this support may be easily compromised by the details of the selected actions.

To manage community support and address a number of community attitudes that continue to be incompatible with good speed management, a number of areas are likely to require attention:

- enforcement strategies need to continue to operate significant face-to-face components to build community support,
- enforcement activities should be actively 'sold' to the community as targeted and successful in meeting road safety objectives,
- infringement processing through the mail should be operated at maximum efficiency with adequate resourcing to maximise effectiveness and minimise negative community perceptions,
- measures should be taken to ensure speed limits are seen as reasonable and acceptable by the community (this may include measures such as communicating the existing level of consideration given to speed limits),
- there needs to be continuing focus on reducing or eliminating the apparent gap between the idea of a speed limit and the perception of 'safe' or 'reasonable' speeding, and
- the need for and successes of the full range of speed management initiatives should continue to be communicated, as should the consequences of individual choices to more significantly internalise the responsibility for speed management rather than the community highlighting external factors for poor driver behaviour.

References

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