

COMMUNITY ROAD SAFETY – ORGANISATIONAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarises the main points to emerge from a review of community road safety in Australia and New Zealand, with emphasis on issues relating to evaluation and priorities. The basis of the review was an extensive program of visits to road safety practitioners working in communities and managers of community road safety programs in road safety authorities. Among the main issues to emerge the recognition of community road safety as part of good practice, the value of strategic plans at the community level, integration of community road safety with other aspects of local government activity, wider communication of the possibilities and benefits of community road safety, more cost-effective use of local media, and the range of problems which can currently be tackled via community programs. Process evaluation is straightforward, but outcome evaluation presents some intriguing challenges due to the small number of crashes occurring in any single community.

INTRODUCTION

This paper briefly summarises the work undertaken as part of Austroads National Strategic Research Program Project NRS 9804. This project involved an extensive program of visits to community road safety programs throughout Australia and New Zealand, visits to the officers of State and national government who administer these programs, and workshop meetings with experienced managers of community road safety programs.

Community road safety is a dynamic area which is presenting many new challenges. The purpose of this paper is to put forward some findings in relation to three of the most important of these challenges, namely how to organise for a sustainable commitment to community road safety, and how to tackle the issue of evaluation. A detailed account of community road safety programs running in the various jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand, and discussion of the key issues which need to be addressed in the further development of community road safety are covered in the full project report (Cairney and Elliott, in preparation).

CONDITIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY ROAD SAFETY PROGRAM

What institutional structures and resources are required for an effective community road safety program? Experience has shown that there are certain minimum requirements at the local level and at the level of State or National government. While local knowledge, effective working partnerships and volunteers have to come from the local level, central government has an important role in providing general guidance, expert advice and funding support. These contributions are considered separately.

Requirements at the local level

A stable representative local body. There needs to be a body at the local level to be responsible for the carriage of the strategy (or the direction of activities where there is no strategy), to coordinate stakeholders and to interact with central government.

Effective personnel need to be available at the effective level. Under many models of community road safety, this primarily means a Road safety Officer/Coordinator who is capable of managing road safety activities and all they entail. At the very least it means someone from the community who is capable of managing carriage of the plan or organisation of ad hoc activities in addition to their normal duties: this is almost always someone from council or one of the major stakeholder organisations who takes it as an additional duty.

Effective partnerships: it is essential that there be good working relationships between stakeholder organisations at the local level, and that they agree about their respective roles and responsibilities in striving for shared goals.

Commitment of local resources: funding, contributions in kind, and volunteer input are all required. Local funding commitments need not be large. However, central government often offers assistance on a dollar for dollar basis, and there may be community demand for projects which do not receive support from current central government programs. Contributions in kind, such as the use of vehicles, venues and advertising can result in projects being run at very low cost. Volunteer activity is the essence of many community road safety activities, and is generally mobilised through existing community organisations such as service clubs.

Requirements at the central level

Management support: it is essential that central government provide a framework for the management of community road safety. This entails a number of elements, such as creating a program so that decision processes are transparent and all communities can be treated on an equal manner, creating a generally supportive climate for community road safety through press releases, planning of Statewide or nationwide activities, and briefing of its own regional staff, and providing effective models for road safety strategies and for individual road safety activities.

Commitment to community road safety: communities need to be assured that central government has a long-term commitment to community road safety, and that they will not be abandoned to their own devices after having gone to the effort of establishing a strategy and a program. Public pronouncements committing the government to support over a number of years are important in building up confidence in the process.

Expert advice: it is unrealistic to expect that expert advice is available for all road safety matters within council. State or National road or road safety authorities generally have this advice available, and so can advise on which problems have potentially feasible solutions, how to go about implementing these solutions, and perhaps even to provide expert services such as running seminars.

Screening process for activities: central government should provide quality control to ensure that projects which are carried out with its financial support are directed towards well planned activities that support worthwhile community road safety objectives and that have a good chance of succeeding. It is essential that this screening process be based on sound criteria which are made known to the participating communities, and that communities receive adequate feedback from the central authority regarding unsuccessful funding applications. It is also desirable that the process should not be too rigidly defined and that it should leave room for differences among communities in the way in which projects are to be carried out.

Evaluation: The central government should undertake two levels of *process* evaluation. It should continually monitor its own processes and interactions with communities, and should also conduct meta-evaluations of projects being carried out by individual municipalities, ie it should continually monitor what the experience of different types of project has been across different municipalities. It is also appropriate for the central authority to attempt *outcome*, although the difficulties associated with this should not be underestimated. A full discussion of the issues associated with evaluation are a major feature of the full report on this project (Cairney and Elliott, in preparation).

EVALUATION

A strong commitment to evaluation is evident in all jurisdictions. However, nearly all the evaluations carried out are evaluations of process rather than outcomes. As a minimum, number of persons attending or numbers of materials delivered are monitored. Opinions of attendees may sought regarding the event, its usefulness and so on. The impact of events is gauged by the extent of media coverage, or occasionally by face to face or telephone interview. In most cases, community road safety activity evaluates well in this type of process analysis.

Only rarely does evaluation extend to behaviours which are directly related to safety outcomes. The type of behavioural observation required for this type of evaluation does require the commitment of resources, and will demand considerable input from the road safety officer in terms of either carrying out the study, or training and supervising community members to conduct the observations. Many behaviours are relatively easy to measure. Speed is probably the easiest, and is often measured as part

of the evaluation of speed management campaigns. Restraint wearing and helmet wearing require more effort to collect the data. Other key behaviours such as drink-driving are difficult to measure other than through data from crash victims or from the enforcement system.

Outcome evaluation in terms of crash reduction at the community level is more difficult due to the small numbers of crashes in any municipality, and the long time it would take to accumulate sufficient crashes to allow a comparison of reasonable statistical power. A critical reading of the only report to attempt an outcome evaluation of an Australian community road safety program illustrates this point well (Moller 1999). Although the author explores several avenues to show that the program has been effective in reducing crashes, none of them are particularly convincing. To some extent, it may be possible to overcome this difficulty by combining outcomes from several municipalities which are running similar programs. However, there are formidable issues associated with the quality and intensity of the programs run in different municipalities, and the commitment of council staff and community organisations to different programs in different municipalities.

Possibly the major threat to carrying out evaluations at the local level is the likelihood that any local programs are likely to be modest in their impact and will be swamped by the effects of centrally planned and delivered campaigns. The difficulty of evaluating activity at the local level is likely to increase as activity at the local level becomes more aligned with the strategic foci of statewide campaigns.

Although some program managers accept that the process evaluations are sufficient justification for community road safety, this author has a personal view that community road safety will remain vulnerable unless casualty reduction outcomes can be demonstrated, at least for a few of the more important programs tackling major road safety issues. The problems surrounding such an evaluation are formidable, and it may in the end prove too difficult. However, we should at least try.

TRENDS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN COMMUNITY ROAD SAFETY

This section attempts to draw together the principal points regarding community road safety which have emerged from this review.

Recognition of Community Road Safety as an element in Best Practice.

Many jurisdictions now recognise community road safety as an essential part of good practice in the delivery of road safety, especially in terms of dealing with local issues and reaching groups and individuals not easily reached by mainstream media. This view is based largely on process evaluation, and to a lesser extent on evaluations of outcomes such as changes in behaviour such as restraint wearing or changes in attitudes and knowledge measured by questionnaires. It has been demonstrated that community road safety can deliver programs and engage the community, but it has not yet been convincingly demonstrated that these programs can actually achieve crash or casualty reductions.

The Value of Strategic Plans

Numerous situations were encountered in the course of this project where the value of strategic plans was clearly demonstrated. The most obvious advantage is that a properly devised strategic plan will ensure that most of the resources and efforts are directed towards significant road safety problems for the community, and use approaches which have a good chance of success. Communities which structure their road safety activities round a strategic plan are therefore more likely to be successful in reducing road trauma than communities which do not have such a plan to direct their efforts.

The existence of a plan can also be very helpful to group functioning. It provides continuous guidance as to priorities, and avoids the problems of wondering what to do next once a major program has been completed. It also largely avoids the problems of conflicting priorities between the central authority and the local community. Provided local concerns are recognised, the community is generally ready to put its efforts into addressing the major problems identified by analysis of the crash data. The strictly local priorities are often issues which can either be resolved early in the history of the committee, or can be scheduled to fit in between the main events in the road safety year, as laid down in a State-wide or regional road safety calendar.

Integration with the rest of local government

The extent to which community road safety is integrated with the rest of local government appears to vary considerably, from a very close involvement of high-profile elected representatives or executives, to fairly minimal involvement. If community road safety is to have maximum impact, the following conditions should be met:

- ?? Road safety should be explicitly acknowledged in council's corporate plan.
- ?? Council should adopt a road safety plan embracing all of its operations.
- ?? Progress on implementing the community road safety plan should be reported regularly to the full council.

Communicating about CRS more widely.

A related issue is the need to communicate the benefits of community road safety more widely. There would appear to be three distinct audiences for more information regarding CRS, each with different information needs. They may be characterised as:

- ?? Elected representatives and senior management in local government.
- ?? Workers in CRS, including RSOs or Coordinators, and council staff, Police and others involved in the actual process.
- ?? The wider community

Media Issues

Country media in general and local suburban newspapers tended to give good coverage to road safety stories and CRS programs. Many coordinators felt better value was to had by organising local events and encouraging local media coverage than by placing paid advertising.

Some coordinators felt that some centrally placed television advertising was not always relevant to their communities, and that more could be done to test media outside the capital centres, and to customise media at the regional level.. Although co-ordinators were generally appreciative of the high quality general road safety advertising they felt they could do much more to promote it if they were given advance notice of campaigns and the reasoning behind them.

Issues tackled by CRS programs

It was widely acknowledged that projects dealing with schools had been a large feature of most programs, and that this emphasis had probably been excessive. School safety was high on the list of community concerns, and arrangements for dropping off and picking up children were generally chaotic. However, very few accidents in fact happened in and around schools, so this emphasis needs to be questioned. Perhaps ironically, the State which seems to have done most to resolve traffic issues in the vicinity of schools is Queensland, which it will be recalled has no formal CRS program, but delivers a successful program through regionally-based Consultants in Queensland Transport. Examination of those traffic management aspects of the Queensland program with a view to application elsewhere would seem to be a worthwhile endeavour.

On the part of some RSOs, there was feeling that to date CRS had concentrated on the obvious, easy issues such as child restraints, bike education and so on. While there had been a great deal of local success with some drink-driving programs, there had been mixed results in other areas, such as campaigns to moderate speed. Some programs to encourage "problem" youth to obtain a driving licence had been highly successful, but there were few other ideas about as to how to deal with young drivers.

One of the limitations on CRS at present was lack of a good model to tackle problems in a number of areas. Rather than wait for solutions to evolve, direct intervention on the part of the central authorities or Austroads to investigate issues or to fund demonstration programs might be appropriate. These areas include:

- ?? Child pedestrian crashes not associated with the journey to and from school.
- ?? Road safety criteria for planning approvals.
- ?? Speed reduction campaigns.
- ?? Intersection crashes.

The role of the Road Safety Officer/Coordinator

The role of the RSO/Coordinator will tend to change with the size of the community. In smaller communities, the RSO tends to do much of the program delivery in a hands-on fashion. This is not possible in large municipalities, where the role is more one of encouraging community groups to take on responsibility for particular programs, usually aimed primarily at their membership. However, in all cases there are core aspects of the role which include acting as an advisor on road safety matters, serving as a focal point for road safety stakeholders, being a public spokesperson on road safety issues and a contact point for the local media. Duties may also include the development of a road safety plan or coordinating the implementation of a plan where one exists.

In many cases, the communication skills of the RSO has enabled a transformation of many aspects of Local Government's interaction with the community. In many cases, the availability of the RSO has enabled a much more consultative approach to be undertaken in relation to a range of road-related issues. In some cases, even communication between local government departments (typically traffic and planning) had been greatly improved.

Who is the community?

This can be a vexed question. In small communities, the community is generally identifiable, and clubs and organisations will draw their membership almost exclusively from the community within which they are based, although there may be more than one club of a particular sort in the community. In large communities, identification of the community is more difficult, with organisations located within the community attracting membership from a range of other communities. Ethnic identity may be stronger than feelings of belonging to a particular place, so individuals may feel that essentially they belong to a geographically dispersed community.

One of the current difficulties for community road safety is that we have crash profiles for *geographic areas*, but not for *communities*. An example will make this clear. Cairney and Gunatillake (2000) showed that ACT residents had as many fatal and serious injury accidents in NSW as they had in the ACT, radically challenging the perception of the ACT driving population as being much less at risk than drivers elsewhere in Australia.

The dynamics of programs

To keep CRS programs sustainable, it is essential to manage the dynamics of the programs to ensure that there is, if not a constant feeling of achievement and contribution, then at least a feeling that the next opportunity to make a positive contribution will not be long in coming. In the course of this project, a few groups were encountered which had languished from a lack of direction following an initial period of success.

CONCLUSIONS

Community road safety is a thriving enterprise which embraces most jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand. Its capacity to deliver messages through community events, seminars and workshops, distribution of materials and coverage in local media has been amply demonstrated, but its capacity to deliver reductions in road casualties remains largely untested, although the little evidence available is encouraging.

This paper has briefly described the range of programs in place, presented a model for the institutional arrangements required for sustainable community road safety, and examined the main issues and opportunities for community road safety programs. It is hoped that this review will assist practitioners and managers in improving the institutional arrangements and extending the reach of what is currently possible in community road safety. It is also hoped that the review will go some way to reassure jurisdictions which are considering establishing or expanding a community road safety program, and to encourage individual municipalities which are considering setting up their own program.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT. The author wishes to acknowledge the contribution of the following people. Rob Klein managed the project on behalf of Austroads and had a major role in project design. Barry Elliott, Consultant, helped in carrying out much of the consultations work. A group of community road safety program managers, including Trish McAloon, Rob Lennon, Julie Parsons, and Julie Gul contributed to a memorable session which resulted in drastic revision of the project and its report. Finally, thanks are due to the many people engaged in community road safety work throughout Australia and New Zealand who made time to discuss their programs and projects with us.

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