

The project has created a focused emphasis on the community's needs and supports the *Queensland Police Service Strategic Plan 2011-2015*, the *National Road Safety Action Plan 2009 – 2010* and the *Queensland Government's Toward Q2: Tomorrow's Queensland ambitions*, particularly *Supporting safe and caring communities*. The project also generated an effective operational interlinking relationship between the Queensland Police Service, agencies and the community in working together to address road safety. Project RAPTAR has been able to effectively utilise the Scan, Analysis, Response and Assessment Model with many divisional issues being addressed.

RAPTAR has been instrumental in forming workable relationships between various agencies and members of the community and has shown how effective these relationships can be. The multi-agency approach and team effort achieved positive results. The method used by RAPTAR could be easily

utilised by other concerned communities to address similar issues and achieve similar results. In particular, the RAPTAR experience could assist other communities to find solutions to the ongoing tragedy of the road toll in other states.

Conclusion

Project RAPTAR has proved that it is possible to engage the local community to work collaboratively in order to promote road safety, to reduce road crashes and traffic-related offences, and above all to reduce injuries and fatalities on the roads.

Sergeant Michael Musumeci and the RAPTAR team won the inaugural 3M-ACRS Diamond Road Safety Award in 2011. As part of the prize, Michael travelled to Florida in mid-February to attend the American Traffic Safety Services Association Annual Convention and Traffic Expo.

Hoon club culture: A South Australian policing response

by Detective Inspector Philip Newitt, Operations Inspector - Organised Crime Investigation Branch

Introduction

The rise in popularity of 'hoon' driving clubs in South Australia in recent years saw three clubs build large, active memberships. The focus of these clubs was to actively promote and organise car cruises and hoon driving events on public roads. The activities of these clubs led to the formation of a policing task force called 'Task Force Diagonal' whose mandate was to move beyond the general enforcement of organised car cruises, to a targeted criminal approach designed to disrupt and dismantle an established hoon culture.

In July 2009, a South Australian newspaper featured an article with the headline *Mob Rule – Nightmare on Main Street*. It described the activities of the 'All Car Club', a group of car 'enthusiasts' captured the previous weekend by a reporter and photographer during a monthly cruise.



Figure 1. Lower Light on 5 July 2009 (reproduced with permission of The Sunday Mail)

The article outlined a night of continual hooning and what can only be described as patently stupid behaviour which posed a danger to participants, spectators and others. Groups of people were photographed standing on Highway 1, Lower Light (approximately one hour north of Adelaide's CBD), during the early hours of a Sunday morning while cars took turns to perform burnouts and 'circle work' in and around spectators. Their actions generated so much smoke and dust that the vision of oncoming traffic was obscured (Figure 1).

In a subsequent police interview, the newspaper reporter described B-double trucks travelling at 100 km/h passing through thick plumes of smoke from burning rubber as group members leapt off the carriageway. Other road users were forced to stop and wait for the burnouts to stop before proceeding. Young men and women were seen standing either side of stationary vehicles as rear wheels were spinning, participants seemingly oblivious to the danger of their actions. The hoon driving session was the culmination of a long night of 'cruising' throughout metropolitan Adelaide where on more than one occasion dangerous driving was photographed and described in detail within the article.

The actions of the group, the level of organisation, the sheer number of participants and unlawful activity clearly raised a significant public safety issue. Understandably the public reaction was intense and many looked towards South Australia Police (SAPOL) seeking a response. Prior to the publication of this story, police were aware of a number of hoon car clubs operating out of Adelaide's northern suburbs. However, the escalation of their activities created a major road safety issue which required an immediate policing response. Task Force Diagonal was created.

Hoon car club culture in South Australia

South Australia enjoys a strong car club culture with allegiances determined along the lines of manufacturers, models, vehicle configuration (V8, turbo, 4WD), country of manufacture and age or vintage of vehicles. Clubs vary markedly in their level of organisation and prestige.

It is important to note that the majority of car club members do not create risks to other road users and Task Force Diagonal only targeted groups whose members consistently engaged in dangerous driving - commonly referred to as 'hoon' driving (hence the term 'hoon car clubs'). Hooning activities generally involve 'misuse of a motor vehicle' as defined by the *Road Traffic Act (SA)* and include behaviours such as driving at excessive speed, 'street racing', wheel spinning, burnouts, noise generation and disturbance, and causing damage to road surfaces.

In July 2009, three main hoon driving clubs operated within metropolitan Adelaide. Widespread media coverage of the formation of Task Force Diagonal saw one group, the Modified Car Klub, immediately cease its organised events. However, the two remaining clubs, Ragerz Commodore Klub (RCK) and its spin-off, the All Car Club (ACC), proved highly resilient and willing to flout the law despite the new enforcement activity.

In 2009, 'Ragerz' or RCK was the most established hoon club operating within South Australia, with the club holding their 10th anniversary run during the height of police investigations. RCK maintained a strong membership base with approximately 800 Facebook members directed and encouraged by two principal organisers. Meeting on the first Saturday night of each month, cruises began at nightfall and set off from the same suburban shopping centre car park that had been used for the previous ten years. Flyers with a predetermined route were distributed as participants rallied around the organisers for a 'briefing'. Upwards of 130 vehicles and occupants would attend and participate. The tradition of the monthly cruise was well established as were the culture of irresponsible and dangerous driving during the cruise and the post-cruise burnout spectacle.

ACC were the group depicted in the newspaper article. With a Facebook following of 1200, a sizeable network of participants and associates existed. Formed in about 2007 and holding cruises on the last Saturday of each month, ACC used social networking to organise and promote events which attracted more than 150 vehicles and at times in excess of 300 participants. The club was popular, well patronised and, in the view of many members, a legitimate social outing. A cruise or 'run' would venture throughout metropolitan Adelaide and nearby country locations, across local policing boundaries and covering perhaps 150 to 200 kilometres.

Anecdotally, the demographics of both groups were very similar. Drivers were almost exclusively Caucasian males aged in their late teens to early 30's, employed in a blue collar or semi-skilled occupation. Employment enabled group members to purchase, register, modify and fuel their vehicles. Driving behaviour commonly described as 'hooning' was not viewed by group members as dangerous or serious, and was undertaken as a social activity or for showing off in front of a crowd.

Whenever possible, police would address participants at the commencement of a cruise to ensure the police presence was noted. The standard address would outline the consequences of risky driving behaviour as well as reiterating police support of their lawful right to participate in a cruise provided members complied with the road rules. Police appeals were frequently met with disdain and at times defiance.

Sometimes cruise participants were alone in their vehicles but in the main at least one other occupant was present. Additional occupants were both men and women of a similar demographic profile. Examples of older participants and family groups were observed, and it was not uncommon to see baby capsules in cars during a Saturday night cruise, or toddlers wandering around car parks in pyjamas into the early hours of the morning. Unfortunately, the presence of children in a vehicle did not preclude the driver's involvement in instances of excessive speed, drink driving or hoon driving behaviour.

Vehicles of choice were almost exclusively older than 10 years of age with the majority either a Holden Commodore or Ford Falcon. Cars were relatively cheap, in an average to poor state of repair, sometimes modified, or not maintained in a roadworthy condition. 'Patching' of vehicles (wearing a 'patch' or sticker to signify members' association or belonging to a particular group or 'clan') and other club identifiers were evident amongst both groups. Unlike a traditional criminal gang, dual membership was common and even encouraged. ACC and RCK vehicle stickers were commonplace and, as with other gangs, were symbolic as a point of membership or allegiance to a club and sub-culture (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Rear window 'patch' and defiant behaviour of some club members (reproduced with permission of The Sunday Mail)

Police Response

The initial response of South Australia Police to the events reported by the Sunday Mail was to locate the witnesses, secure the evidence, identify those involved and take positive action. The initial response resulted in the arrest of three suspects, permitting police an initial insight into hoon car club culture. Given the semi-formal structure and hierarchy of each group, their extensive use of social networking sites to organise virtual and physical meetings, and their entrenched sub-culture, it was clear that a once-off police operation was not going to create the lasting change in attitude needed to reduce the serious risks associated with the hooning activity.

A review of previous enforcement initiatives with respect to both clubs demonstrated the difficulty in policing large numbers of cruise participants who were able to disperse and re-form at will. The geographical area covered and the time period over which a cruise would occur (12 hours plus) further complicated police efforts. To monitor activity and enforce compliance with legislation, a degree of police coordination which was higher than any previously undertaken was required.

Until the formation of Task Force Diagonal, local traffic enforcement officers and intelligence sections had sole responsibility for targeting hoon clubs. However, they largely operated in isolation and without broad and consistent coordination or centralised support. The introduction of Task Force Diagonal on 9 July 2009 brought about a more sustained and coordinated policing response. The approach brought together a mix of experienced detectives, field intelligence officers, a criminal analyst, traffic enforcement specialists and general duties members under the management of the Officer in Charge of the Major Crash Investigation Unit, Traffic Support Branch. Eleven full-time staff were supplemented by the combined resources of local services areas and traffic enforcement specialists during club cruises and runs.

Diagonal's mandate was to take action against those organising and taking part in aggravated recidivist hoon driving activities. The central policing concept was that professional but consistent pressure, education and enforcement would change attitudes and behaviour. Persistence and consistency of effort proved crucial in achieving these goals.

The attitude of group organisers is typified in comments quoted in the Sunday Mail article, where the President of the All Car Club describes himself as 'a bit of a hoon', justifying group actions as 'It's fun, it's just showing what your car is made of. We're just letting off steam'. Similar comments and attitudes were repeated by participants many times during Task Force Diagonal operations. It became apparent that for some participants, group culture had normalised and legitimised activity to a point where policing actions were seen as curtailing legitimate and acceptable behaviour.

Although initially considered to be a 'traffic policing' initiative, the strategy of using criminal investigators, intelligence officers

and an analyst meant a more rigorous investigation and greater focus on the criminality of driver actions to achieve real change in the activity of recidivist, persistent offenders. The targeting of key identities to break down the culture became a priority. Traditional traffic policing tools such as defecting and seizing vehicles under hoon legislation, issuing expiation or instant loss of licence notices and sending offenders to Court for traffic (summary) offences were important components of the response; however, entrenched attitudes and the ability of the groups to persist despite policing actions required police to adopt a more innovative approach. The real potential for serious injury or death reinforced this approach.

Group memberships were traced and plotted to inform targeting and guide the deployment of resources. It became apparent that members and affiliates of RCK and ACC, and more widely those who enjoyed participating in burnout activities, shared information concerning a network of hooning 'hot spots'. Local residents and businesses helped to build a picture of activity upon which police tactics were based. This proved highly beneficial as participants would visit hot spots repeatedly, and it was possible to collect good quality evidence which led to prosecutions (Figure 3).



Figure 3. A targeted hoon hot spot reviewed by police

Policing RCK and ACC cruises and burnout congregations proved a labour-intensive task over an extended period. Where possible, immediate enforcement action was instigated both to mitigate the risk of offending and send a clear message to other participants. However, police continued to carry out arrests and seizure of vehicles that could not be conducted on cruise nights due to the sheer number of participants involved.

Intelligence indicated that the timing of cruises, and the separation and re-formation during the early hours of the morning, were a deliberate tactic to disrupt police attention. This tactic was used in the knowledge that the majority of late night traffic police completed their weekend shift at 2.00 a.m. Needless to say, surprised faces met police as they regularly arrived at burnout locations at 4.30 a.m. Additional hoon car club tactics included the use of hire cars by central figures of the groups and continually varying routes and meeting points. Such was their determination to continue their activities.

Despite a high degree of police attention during a ‘cruise’, police still apprehended drivers travelling at very high speeds in suburban locations, drink and drug drivers, and those who could not resist spinning their vehicle wheels in front of a crowd. Nights of intense police presence did not dissuade splinter groups from forming for sustained wheel spin and burnout activities.

Good quality low light video was regularly obtained from group burnout sessions, highlighting the obvious danger posed to drivers and spectators alike. This footage was highly persuasive and greatly assisted prosecution and the laying of more serious charges including ‘Acts to Cause Harm’ under the *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1935*. Provisions under this offence permitted a higher range of penalties including imprisonment and the instigation of longer licence disqualification periods. Briefs of evidence against RCK and ACC organisers were established over time. Because cruise organisers might not actually drive a vehicle, police collected evidence to demonstrate the offence of ‘Promote or organise an event involving misuse of a motor vehicle’; this charge had not previously been laid in South Australia. Two prosecutions were launched against RCK and ACC organisers; however, due to a number of factors the benchmark of ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ could not be reached and, disappointingly, convictions were not obtained. Where possible the most serious available criminal offence was laid and pursued through to prosecution.

Considerable effort was made to engage with responsible clubs to explain police activities and demonstrate support for legitimate activities. Media reporting caused much trepidation concerning the police and government response. As a part of the overall engagement and media strategy, members of the investigation team provided presentations and attended legitimate club meetings, cruises, runs, and ‘show and shine’ days to allay fears and discuss policing priorities. Importantly, police media messages focused on reinforcing responsible use of vehicles and legitimate vehicle clubs.

If the success of Task Force Diagonal is to be judged by enforcement outcomes alone, it can be described as highly successful. Between July 2009 and November 2010:

- 206 drivers were either arrested or reported for driving matters.
- 883 infringement notices were issued.
- 614 vehicles were ‘defected’.
- 102 vehicles were impounded and two forfeiture applications processed.
- 26 drivers had their driving licence instantly disqualified as a result of driving behaviour.

Conclusion

To combat the culture of hoon car clubs in South Australia, police made every effort to work with the organisers of the hoon runs, asking them to modify their behaviour and comply with road traffic rules. However, their disregard for the laws and safety of themselves and others, coupled with their persistence, left SAPOL with little option other than to create a dedicated task force to address the problem.

The work of Task Force Diagonal was a resounding success. By April 2010, the All Car Club had ceased operations and by July 2010, Ragerz Commodore Klub had given up organised cruises.

Following the success of Task Force Diagonal and as part of a SAPOL traffic policing restructure, the State Traffic Enforcement Section was created in December 2010. This section undertakes traffic enforcement across South Australia, collecting intelligence and adopting a proactive tactical approach to significant road safety issues, including the policing of car clubs and targeting organised dangerous driving activities. The *SAPOL Road Safety Strategy 2011 – 2014* was developed with the goal of reducing serious road trauma in South Australia by at least 12%. The strategy is underpinned by the philosophy that as a society we must agree that death and serious injuries on our roads are not inevitable or simply a by-product of community road use. The strategy sets seven priorities including specific reference to drivers who misuse motor vehicles and create danger for other road users.

Specific outcomes for State Traffic Enforcement Section include:

- a reduction in road trauma
- a reduction in organised dangerous driving events
- targeting of recidivist dangerous drivers
- the efficient and safe regulation of major event traffic.

Task Force Diagonal successfully halted organised dangerous driving events associated with car clubs. Since then State Traffic Enforcement Section has monitored the conduct of various car clubs to distinguish between legitimate cruising activity and organised dangerous driving. Adopting fundamentally the same tactics as Task Force Diagonal, State Traffic Enforcement Section attends cruises to maintain an overt police presence to deter offending and to take enforcement action where appropriate with the aim to bring about a long-term change in car club culture and behaviour.

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