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HAVE WE GOT THE BALANCE RIGHT?

Abstract

Since the shift towards reliance on evidence-led policies the amount and salience of road safety research commissioned by government and other public bodies has increased substantially. This paper examines research knowledge that has helped to inform recent policies contained in the 2005 Road Safety Bill and Consultation Paper on Offences involving Bad Driving and considers whether the balance between research and policy is about right, whether more research is needed or whether missed policy opportunities from research can be identified. Focus is on the offences of unlicensed and uninsured driving, speeding, impaired driving (drink, drugs and other medical aspects) and bad driving, where much research has been targeted. Concern is expressed to ensure adequate resources are made available to provide the enforcement capability required to police new, modified and still troublesome offences and policy-makers are asked to consider gender differences when assessing public support for changes to traffic law enforcement policy. The paper concludes by asserting the value of recent research in steering current policy towards practices likely to help in casualty reduction but regrets the failure to proceed with some bolder moves supported by research.

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Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, road safety casualty reduction targets have noticeably come to the fore (e.g. DETR, 2000: 7) and it is evident that a renewed emphasis has been placed on road safety by government. Committees have been convened, a rash of policy consultations have taken place, and amid the gathering momentum one outcome is the current second attempt at passing a new Road Safety Act. The message is that road safety has come in from the cold — it is now being taken seriously.

To have reached this position much store has been placed on the products of research, and in recent times many studies have been commissioned by government and government agencies and some by research councils and commercial organisations. This has been prompted in part by the general shift within the public sector over the last decade towards a reliance on evidence-led policies and practices.

In the present road safety context, this is where research has helped to produce knowledge about, for example:

- the nature and extent of types of unlawful driving behaviour
- those most at risk of the behaviours
- the influences on them and their motivations
- public perceptions and attitudes towards the offences

This research may then lead to:

- recommendations to help form enforcement policies for crime control purposes
- evaluation of pilot schemes when enforcement practice is trialled or rolled out more widely
- further research to monitor progress
- feedback to commissioning agency on the effectiveness of the new policy

So research has a wide-ranging role in shaping road safety policy and practice.

This paper will take a broad look at recent research that has informed knowledge about particular kinds of road traffic offence and it will examine this knowledge in relation to current enforcement policies and planned provisions in the Road Safety Bill 2005 and possible provisions arising out of the Consultation on Offences involving Bad Driving 2005. It will also consider whether:

- the balance between research and policy is about right at the moment

- more research is needed, or
- whether missed opportunities from research can be identified and that more action is needed

The offence groups to be highlighted will comprise:

- Unlicensed driving
- Uninsured driving
- Impaired driving — drink, drugs, and medical aspects of fitness to drive
- Speeding
- Bad driving offences

Several general points will round off the paper at the end.

Unlicensed driving

Home Office statistics for 2003 show that ‘licence, insurance and recordkeeping’ offences constituted the second largest offence group dealt with by official police action in 2003, after ‘speeding offences’ (Fiti et al., Table 2). In view of its extent, it is good to see that several important research studies have been commissioned by DETR/DfT and the Home Office in the last decade on unlicensed driving, most notably those by Broughton (1999), Rose (2000) and Knox and colleagues (2003).

Broughton (1999) conducted a study of DVLA records between 1988 and 1997 which showed that (excluding provisional licence holders) unlicensed drivers committed 25% of all insurance offences, 13% of drink/drug offences, 26% of reckless or dangerous driving offences and 50% of all theft or unauthorised taking offences.

Rose (2000) looked at the criminal histories of large samples of offenders convicted for mainstream, car theft and serious traffic offences in a study of the Home Office Offenders Index. The data showed that more Driving Whilst Disqualified (DWD) offenders had previous convictions for mainstream and vehicle theft offences than did mainstream offenders. They concluded that DWD was part of a pattern of generalised offending on and off the road and DWD offenders had more serious criminal profiles than mainstream offenders.

The strong suggestion from both of these studies was that unlicensed driving is frequently not an isolated offence — it is committed alongside other serious traffic offences and mainstream offending. Those who do it are more likely to become crash involved and some may have more

serious criminal profiles than mainstream offenders. This information doubtless confirms the police's own experience, but its effect hopefully has been to raise the profile of roads policing to be seen as a crucial function of policing rather than as a peripheral one, which had been the finding of HMIC in its 1998 research on roads policing.

The other research study by Knox and colleagues (2003) comprised a wide-ranging, multi-method study of the offence and its offenders. They found that the type most likely to drive unlicensed each month were those who had never held a licence. They estimated that less than 1% of all driving is completed by unlicensed drivers, but almost 2% of PI crashes involves a driver found guilty of unlicensed driving. This equates to a conservative estimate of 6,300 annual casualties in Britain, of which 900 are KSIs.

Despite unlicensed drivers having a much greater crash risk compared with the average driver, the Knox study showed that only around a third of their unlicensed respondents said they had been caught for it. Indeed, unlicensed driving has been one of the classic invisible offences — only coming to light by accident (literally), by a random patrol check or by attracting police attention for an unrelated suspected offence.

The research conclusion therefore is that this offence deserves immediate attention and high priority, so it is encouraging to see that views on a proposed new offence of Causing Death by Disqualified or Unlicensed Driving were invited in the Consultation on Offences involving Bad Driving. It is also encouraging to note that this new offence has now been incorporated into the Road Safety Bill.

Yet the flip side of this proposal is the implication of considerable weaknesses remaining in the licensing system at present since deaths caused by such drivers do continue to occur, as noted in the Knox (2003) study. It is hoped that the several remedial steps planned under the Road Safety Bill to improve operation of the licensing system will reduce unlicensed driving further. These include recall of the older paper licences for more accurate record maintenance (under clause 38), and disclosure of driver and vehicle data to foreign authorities to assist in cutting organised crime (under clause 28).

The key hope, however, to cut unlicensed and uninsured driving is the increasing use and roll-out of ANPR camera equipment and police teams enabled to operate it (e.g. DfT, 2005c). ANPR — automated numberplate recognition technology — significantly improves detection rates compared with traditional policing methods and avoids the situation on patrol where detection of illegality is largely down to chance.

It is good to note that many recommendations from the Knox research have generally fed into the considerations for better enforcement, though two suggestions deserve more attention.

- ▶ These are to examine the consistency in charging, prosecuting and sentencing unlicensed offenders — since the suspicion existed in the research that where several offences were charged, unlicensed driving could get overlooked (2003: 15). This is important as those who are prosecuted may hear from others that this happens, raising the risk of more frequent repetition.
- ▶ The second suggestion is for research to be undertaken on the effects of failing the driving test to see how this contributes to unlicensed driving.

Other research has concluded there are large numbers who continue to drive without a licence having been sentenced to take a re-test following a disqualification and conviction for dangerous driving (Pearce et al, 2002: 83). Another recent study cited DVLA figures showing that among the 72,000 young drivers who had had their licences revoked by November 2003 under the Road Traffic Act (New Drivers) 1995, less than half had by that time been re-tested (Greenaway, 2004: 12). Together these studies indicate that:

- ▶ It would be very useful to explore more fully through qualitative means the subsequent driving careers, lifestyles and coping mechanisms of young and older drivers who have experienced a disqualification.

Uninsured driving

A recent independent review by Greenaway (2004) concluded from a range of survey and statistical sources that around 1 in 20 drivers on British roads drove uninsured and that typically young, urban males were the most likely culprits (ibid: 11-14). The costs of uninsured driving are many, one being the additional premium of around £30 paid by all insured motorists to offset costs arising from such illegal activity. Another is the greater crash risk of uninsured drivers noted by Blows et al. (2003, cited by Greenaway) and the knock-on costs of this to society. Uninsured driving is frequently prosecuted with other document offences like unlicensed driving, having no MOT, vehicle tax or vehicle registration certificate, thus reducing the incidence of this offence is urgent for all these reasons.

A raft of recommendations were made in the Greenaway report and it is good to see that the government has already acted upon some of them and is in the process of considering others.

Two positive steps have been made under the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005. The first (under section 153) means that the Motor Insurers' Information Centre (MICC) can now actively supply police with information about suspected uninsured vehicles when, for example, drivers' policies appear to have expired. This should improve the likelihood of targeted detection provided there are sufficient enforcement resources available to follow-up any leads given. The second measure (under section 152 of this Act) provides for the immediate police power to seize uninsured vehicles rather than the previous unsatisfactory situation where the uninsured driver could continue on his or her way, albeit illegally, after the police contact.

Speeding behaviour

Research findings about speed are clear enough. Research has established that cutting average speeds by 1 mph cuts average crash frequency by around 5% (Taylor et al 2000:2), that raising speed limits increases the crash rate (e.g. Garber and Graham, 1990) and that crashes at higher speeds lead to greater injury severity (e.g. Evans, 2004).

Recently, Mosedale and Purdy (2004) examined large amounts of STATS19 data for contributory and precipitating factors in personal injury road accidents to arrive at the following conclusions. In 2002, 'excessive speed' was implicated overall in:

- 30% of fatal collisions
- 19% of serious collisions
- 12% of slight injury collisions

This illustrates clearly that speed impacts on injury severity. Since excessive speed might also be implied within other of the 54 contributory factors like 'aggressive driving' (listed in around 6% of fatal collisions overall, 'behaviour – careless, reckless, thoughtless' (listed in around 21%), and 'behaviour – in a hurry' (in about 7%), the importance of excessive speed increases. This feeds into the assessment that excessive speed is implicated as a contributory factor in around a third of fatal collisions.

Despite the facts on speeding, it continues to be an emotive issue for those who wish to travel faster than the law allows. Research has shown that motorists tend to drive only up to speeds at which they

feel comfortable and do not think it is dangerous to exceed limits when they do it (Corbett, Simon and O'Connell, 1998: 13-15). Partly because of this, some drivers seem to resent the strict controls on their speed choice represented by speed cameras and a small minority of drivers are not in favour of them (e.g. Corbett and Simon, 1999: 72, Gains et al, 2004: 43-55), although this means that the bulk are.

As the 'netting off' scheme now in widespread operation is helping to expand camera usage as the key means of speed limit enforcement, care is needed that public support remains high. There are various common discourses around speed cameras (e.g. DfT, 2003) and two of them that bear on public support are 'how effective are they?' and 'are camera fines not just a stealth tax?'

'How effective are cameras?'

In regard to their effectiveness, many are familiar with the research commissioned by the government that shows cameras in England and Wales save over 100 lives overall and over 4,000 personal injury collisions each year (Gains et al, 2004: 6). Moreover, an independent systematic review of 14 international studies on camera effectiveness concluded that all but one showed a reduction in collisions and casualties up to three years post-installation (Pilkington and Kinra, 2005).

'Are camera fines not just a stealth tax?'

In regard to revenue generation, there is a suspicion among some that cameras are deployed as an easy 'money earner' or 'stealth tax' for government (e.g. Daily Mail, 4.7.05: 31; DfT, 2003: Safety or Cash, 1-8).

Insufficient numbers of roundels indicating the permitted maximum speed limit is one claim from research that feeds into this assertion (Institute of Advanced Motorists, 2005) and certainly research indicates that some speeding at camera sites is inadvertent (Corbett and Simon 1999: 50-51). There are also indications from research in late 2003 that drivers were unclear then about how the netting-off scheme worked and how the fine monies were distributed (Corbett and Caramlau, 2004). This discourse may not only fuel discontent among drivers, but could also provide justification for those preferring faster speeds to continue as usual (except at camera locations), since in their view the dangers of speed can be discounted as the cameras' main purpose is to provide a easy source of income for government, police or local authorities.

Thus the message from research to date is that cameras are effective in reducing road casualties, justifying their expansion, but there is a need to tread carefully to ensure that public support is not dimmed.

In particular, more emphasis on how the hypothecation or netting-off scheme works seems important — since the terms themselves may have little meaning to drivers — and could be regarded as a measure designed to hoodwink drivers rather than to improve road safety.

Graduated penalties for speeding

One of the key provisions of the Road Safety Bill 2005 is the planned introduction of graduated penalties for speeding offences (under clauses 2 and 3), with a discussion document issued earlier suggesting at which cut-off speeds lower and higher penalties might apply. Certainly, research would support the broad principle of heavier penalties for those exceeding by the widest margins.

For instance, research has suggested that disqualification from driving presents a bigger deterrent than high fines to most drivers (Corbett, Simon and McConnell, 1998: 24). Moreover, the 2003 Motoring Statistics (Fiti et. al., 2005) show that despite the huge increase in numbers of drivers receiving licence endorsements for speeding (Table 2), the number of ‘totterers’ who reach 12 penalty points is far fewer than might be expected (Table 16). This pattern indicates that drivers at risk of disqualification can modify their speeds if wished. So more penalty points for worse speeding breaches should present a larger deterrent to the fastest drivers.

However, the proposal in the discussion note issued in September 2004 for fewer penalty points and lower fines for breaches of the 30 mph limits up to 39 mph and of the 40 mph limit up to 45 mph would run counter to the research evidence. Research shows that the critical band is 30-39 mph where mainly survivable chances on vehicle impact switch to mainly fatal ones (Ashton and Mackay 1979; Hobbs and Mills, 1984). Even the risk of being killed at 35 mph than at 30 mph is more than twice as great (Ashton, 1998, unpublished report to DETR).

Many organisations and individuals voiced their concerns in the consultation period that the proposed reduction in points and fines at the lower margins of excess would undermine the government’s own message that excess speed in residential areas is dangerous. It is therefore encouraging to hear that ministers are prepared for a rethink via more consultation once the Bill has been enacted, though there is no real research evidence to support lower penalties for lower margins of excess.

Alternative sanctions?

However, in terms of wishing to educate and to deter through attitude change rather than inadvertently to risk alienating detected speeders,

emerging research findings suggest promise from speed awareness courses (e.g. McKenna, 2004) and other driver improvement schemes (e.g. Walker, 2004) as an alternative to penalty points and fines. There would appear further ground to cover before confidence in a beneficial outcome is more certain (for example, see Lai, 2005) and refinement for specific audiences seems a key requirement. However, such courses hold out hope for the future and provision for them is made in the 2005 Road Safety Bill (under clause 34). In this regard it is interesting that ACPO recently endorsed a national roll-out of speed awareness courses as an alternative to prosecution for suitable detected speeding drivers (ACPO, 2005).

Impaired driving: drink, drugs, eyesight

Alcohol impairment

A comparison of drink-drive statistics in the early 1980s with those of the early 1990s will show substantial falls recorded in the numbers of drink-drive accidents and casualties over that period. However, there has been a reversal of the preceding downward trend since 1998 with a gradual rising incidence (Table 2a, Mosedale et al, 2004) which is a worrying matter and begs the question 'why?'.

The need to raise perceived and actual risk of detection

Research conducted in the early 1990s among pub patrons who expected to drive away from the pub over the permitted blood-alcohol limit (Corbett et al, 1991) showed drivers expressed fear about the penalty of disqualification and a high fine but thought the chances of receiving it were very low. Mostly, those thinking they would be over the limit intended to drive away as they would feel sufficiently fit to drive.

As drivers in general tend to underestimate the risk of accident and think accidents are more likely to happen to other drivers (Finn and Bragg, 1986), it follows that many drivers over the limit will think they are fit to drive, that they are unlikely to have an accident so will not be breathalysed, and that the chances of detection otherwise are low. These findings obviously have implications for the numbers and visibility of officers available for enforcement and strongly suggest that raising the perceived and actual risk of detection among those tempted to drive when over the blood-alcohol limit should be a high priority. Indeed, deterrence research has often noted the greater influence of perceived detection risk over perceived punishment severity (e.g. Homel, 1993).

In this regard, introducing Random Breath Testing whereby drivers can be stopped at the roadside for testing for no other specific reason would

lend some unpredictability to the risk of detection. Further, Targeted Breath Testing at high-risk locations and times such as outside licensed premises would also raise perceived and actual detection risk. And as remarked by the government in 2000 before it changed its mind on wanting to grant targeted breath testing powers to police (DETR, 2000: para. 4.16):

“Intelligence-led policing is commonplace in dealing with other crime. We would expect public support and understanding from people stopped in such situations.”

Whether or not either of such enhanced powers is actually needed — since some police say in practice that no more are required — potential offenders are likely to believe they are more at risk if Random and/or Targeted Breath Testing were introduced and it would give those who suffer pressure from peers to ‘have another one’ far more justification for resisting (Homel, *op. cit.*).

Random Breath Testing has been well researched in many countries (e.g. see Peek-Asa, 1999 for a review) including Australia, Switzerland and the US and shown to be effective there. Is it not time to introduce this policy here to bring us into line with the majority of European countries?

Other means to reduce collision risk

In 2000, the government cited research that lowering the permitted blood-alcohol limit could save around 50 deaths and 250 serious injuries a year (DETR, 2000: para. 4.19). It nevertheless resisted lowering the limit on the grounds that this should be considered more appropriately in a European-wide context (*ibid.*: para. 4.20). No formal European directive then ensued but the government considered and rejected the European Commission’s subsequent recommendations (DfT, 2004a: para 3:24). Since then its stance has remained unchanged, despite recent research by Professor Allsop (2005) reinforcing the savings in lives that would be made if the blood/alcohol limit were lowered from 80 mg to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood.

From a road safety perspective the implication is clear and while there are of course many considerations that would need to feed into such a change, it is disappointing that the opportunity has been missed to harmonise with most European limits this time around.

On a more positive note, it is encouraging to see that other research on alcohol and driving has impacted on another provision included in the Road Safety Bill (clause 14), namely that trials of Alcohol Ignition

Interlock devices should be undertaken with repeat drink-drivers. This arises from research showing that such devices can work well to prevent drunk drivers taking to the roads (e.g. Beirness, 2004).

One final point on alcohol and driving. Recent surveys show that UK teenagers are the heaviest drinkers in Europe (ESPAD, 2004), and a nationally representative Home Office survey showed that 39% of young women and 49% of young men (aged 18-24 years) admitted binge drinking in the previous month (Matthews and Richardson, 2005).

- ▶ Given these alarming figures, it would be useful to explore through research the impact of several features on drink-drive habits and patterns that appear to have helped revive the drinks industry in the last decade. These are the introduction of ‘alcopops’ and the cultural shift towards increased levels of alcohol consumption by young women.

Drug impairment

A large-scale, representative survey of young Scottish drivers (aged 17-39) in 2000 found that 5% admitted driving under the influence of an illegal drug within the previous 12 months (Ingram et al, 2001). More recent research by Brake (2005) showed that 14% of young drivers (aged 17-25) admitted ingesting illegal drugs before driving and 10% admitted mixing drugs with alcohol before driving.

This is clearly a very serious problem, and the ongoing development of new devices for evidential roadside testing for drug impairment is therefore urgent and much needed. When accredited for use, such technology will strengthen the powers introduced in December 2004 for police to conduct roadside co-ordination tests for drug impairment.

- ▶ Now we have an idea of the prevalence of drug driving, research to explore the rationales for doing it and how and why drugs are combined with alcohol among those at risk would be useful for the purpose of future intervention. For instance, do such drivers think that staying under the alcohol limit combined with some cannabis ingestion is legal or not dangerous?

Fitness to drive

Moving on to some medical aspects of fitness to drive, it is good to see in an era when more of us are dependent on privatised personal modes of transport for mobility especially as we age, that research studies (e.g.

by the DVLA in 2005) and research programmes (e.g. by the DfT in 2004) have been initiated on various aspects of medical fitness to drive, and that the many issues arising are being considered in detail.

However, more and swifter action on two matters could be considered.

Labelling of over-the-counter medicine

Research published in 2003 (Horne and Barratt) showed that information on the inserts in the packaging of medicines were not necessarily consistent with information supplied on the external packaging, and warnings of drowsiness of medicines with this potential were sometimes missing on either the packed or insert. Hopes were expressed that moves could be made to ensure greater consistency, but in such an important area — when failure to realise the side effects of medicine could lead to seriously impaired driving — one wonders if more than hope is required, and whether more urgency could be injected into steps to ensure consistency.

Eyesight impairment

Surveys have shown that ‘up to 1 in 10 drivers would fail the standard eye test if retaken today’ (e.g. Eyecare Trust, 2002) and 1 in 3 drivers do not have their eyes tested as often as recommended (RNIB, 2005). Yet reliance continues to be placed on self-regulation by drivers to decide if their eyesight is good enough for safe driving.

Drivers are supposed to comply with the Highway Code, rule 81, and indeed there are sanctions for failing to comply, but the RAC Foundation (2001) found that apparently fewer than 1 in 3 drivers consult the Code after taking their driving test. Given that good eyesight is a key prerequisite to safe driving and that eyesight should be easier to measure and determine safe limits for than many medical conditions, is it not time to institute a provision for regular eyesight tests to be conducted as a continuing condition of the privilege to drive, or at least upon licence renewal?

This is especially so since the following contributory factors to all personal injury accidents in Mosedale and Purdy’s sample could include elements of poor eyesight:

- Failed to judge other person’s path or speed : 23%
- Looked but did not see: 19%
- Lack of judgement of own path: 14%

The DfT has recently commissioned several studies on visual field defects for which it is to be commended, but more urgent attention could

be given to considering whether continued self-regulation of drivers' eyesight is a sufficient safeguard against those who may inadvertently or otherwise drive with defective vision.

Bad driving offences: dangerous and careless driving

It is very pleasing that there has been some major research commissioned into dangerous and careless driving offences by the DfT and Home Office in the last few years, and that there is also a very active concern to improve the present structure of penalties and offences. These range from the consultation paper on Road Traffic Penalties (Home Office, 2000) and the government's response (Home Office, 2002), the report of the Select Committee on Transport on Traffic Law and Enforcement (Select Committee, 2004) and the government's response (Home Office, 2005a) and now a joint consultation set up by the DCA, DfT and Home Office (Home Office, 2005b) that hopefully will lead to new legislation on road traffic offences.

Several points linking research done and the recent consultation are as follows.

The objectivity of drivers

In chapter 3 of the consultation paper there is discussion of the proposal to retain firstly, the objective test for defining the two general offences of bad driving, and secondly, the two definitions of 'below' and 'far below' the standard of a careful and competent driver. With regard to the latter, there is a concern about the objectivity required to assess these standards.

In essence, it seems drivers tend not to be very objective and it appears that the bulk use their own driving style and behaviour as the baseline for what is thought careful and competent. Traffic officers will confirm this as drivers do not appreciate any critique of their driving style. Research has also established that drivers tend to overrate their competence and abilities with more rating their skills as 'above' average' than 'below average' (e.g. Svenson, 1981; Gregersen, 1996; Pearce et al, 2002: 85). Moreover, in one study (Corbett and Simon 1992: 42), it was found that most drivers — including a majority of self-confessed 'high' traffic offenders — thought the roads would be safer if all drove like themselves

Consequences flowing from this include the likelihood that among members of a jury who are drivers, some will believe they are competent

and careful yet have no problem with exceeding speed limits by substantial margins and other behaviours not advised in the Highway Code. Such drivers may be less willing to concur that a defendant's speed or other actions were 'far below' what a competent and careful driver would consider appropriate in the circumstances.

Therefore, if the careful and competent driver is held to be the model driver outlined in the Highway Code — which Code less than 1 in 3 drivers consult after passing their driving test (RAC, 2001) — then the earlier suggestion of PACTS (2005) should be endorsed — that the position of the Code should be strengthened in law.

Other comments from research on bad driving

Pearce and colleagues (2002, 2004) carried out some wide-ranging research into dangerous and careless driving and several points from that study arise.

Firstly, they noted some inconsistency in the charging standards applied to careless and dangerous driving offences (ibid, 2002: 51-52). Thus the intention in the Consultation Paper to define in statute how careless driving should be distinguished from dangerous driving would be most welcome, and this would also serve to distinguish standards of driving 'below' and 'far below' that expected of a careful and competent driver.

Secondly, Pearce noted (2004: 65) that although it is not a requirement for defendants to careless driving charges to attend the magistrates' court hearing, there seemed to be road safety benefit for them to do so, as it was a salutary experience for many. The researcher recommended that it could be a positive road safety move to require that all defendants to careless driving charges attend at court.

Thirdly, in similar vein, the same research commented on the often reflective sentiments of careless and dangerous drivers about their offences (ibid: 25-32). Given that such reflections could be positively channelled through the medium of restorative justice to help with rehabilitation — especially when tailored to individual circumstances — then another PACTS (2005) suggestion can be supported that restorative justice initiatives deserve a trial with road traffic offenders.

Research to monitor such initiatives has reported some successes in non-traffic offending contexts (e.g. Hoyle et al, 2002; Miers, 2004) and Lord Falconer and the government are much behind the wider use of restorative justice schemes. Certainly, in the longer-term benefit of road

safety, the re-education and rehabilitation of poor drivers to enhance understanding of the dangers of their driving styles could yield far greater rewards than just deliver just deserts to such offenders.

Revised resources for traffic law enforcement and public reassurance

Of course, it is well and good to have revised and new legislative provisions to tackle road crime. There also has to be sufficient and preferably improved resources to deliver the anticipated outcomes. In this regard there have been a range of changes to facilitate improvement in road traffic law enforcement designed especially to free-up police time and resources for this. In particular, in excess of £15m has been allocated by government for the ANPR roll-out and there has been a huge increase in civilian staff behind the scenes and in enforcement support and traffic management roles.

However, as noted in the HMIC (1998) research, roads policing has not always been afforded the highest priority within police forces, so it is hoped that the aims asserted in the latest Roads Policing Strategy (jointly issued in early 2005 by ACPO, DfT and the Home Office, DfT 2005b) to maintain an adequate physical police presence on the roads and to provide public reassurance will be achieved. It is good that these bodies are seemingly talking with one voice, yet their efforts to talk up the salience of roads policing is somewhat dampened by the latest National Policing Plan for 2005-2008 (Home Office, 2004) that manages to devote only one paragraph to roads policing out of 120 (para 3.50).

Certainly, ANPR teams are providing an increased presence on the roads, and they can do more than detect licence, insurance and vehicle registration offences. But whether they will detect as many offences of dangerous and careless driving, seatbelt offences and drink and drug driving where no accident has occurred that are currently less amenable to enforcement by technological means than by traditional policing methods is less certain.

It is therefore hoped that the net effect of the new arrangements will be to cut *all* kinds of serious road crime — the traditional troublesome ones and any new future offences — and not just those capable of targeted detection by ANPR.

Traffic law enforcement policy and the gender of drivers

The last point concerns the gender of drivers. As we are all aware, drivers are a powerful constituency comprising the bulk of the electorate, and are obviously one for the political parties and government to keep ‘onside’. Yet drivers’ views as presented in the media are rarely distinguished by gender (Corbett and Caramlau, in preparation), and women now comprise more than 4 in 10 licence holders in England and Wales and their proportion is growing (National Travel Survey Unit, 2005: 37).

At the same time, research shows that women in general are more road safety conscious than men (e.g. DfT, 2004b; Stradling et al, 2003: ch. 8), they tend to view breaches of the traffic rules more seriously than men (e.g. Stradling et al, 2003: 104), from self-report studies it appears they comply more with road traffic laws than men (e.g. Graham and Bowling, 1995; Corbett, 2003; 118-120), and motoring statistics suggest they are convicted less frequently and for less serious offences than men (Corbett, in preparation).

This is not to say that all women can be distinguished from all men in these ways. But the net suggestion is that it could be important for policy-makers to consider these gender differences when estimating public support for any changes mooted in regard to traffic law enforcement policies.

In other words, it could be unwise to assume a cross-gender consensus, as may be implied by use of statements in the media or by lobby groups like ‘drivers think’, ‘drivers want’ or ‘drivers believe’. This could be especially important if such thoughts of undistinguished ‘drivers’ implied a consensus on a road safety issue when in fact there was a gender difference — for instance, suggestions that ‘drivers’ want fewer speed cameras or higher speed limits. It could be that more moderate opinions characterise those whose voices tend to be unheard.

Conclusion

The links between recent research studies and consequent planned legislation and topics for consultation have been the main focus of this paper. We have seen that research has given us many pointers to light the way for new and amended policy and legislation to help in casualty reduction, and in some areas where research results have already fed into the process, subsequent enforcement practices have delivered clear benefits to road safety.

In some topic areas, more research is still required such as medical aspects of fitness to drive, the increase in drink drive collisions, the rationales of drug drivers, and the impact of failing a driving test or being sentenced to a driving re-test following disqualification. Yet in several of these same areas (e.g. speeding and drink driving) it is considered that we have acquired sufficient information from research to go ahead now with some bolder moves. It is hoped that courage can be found to take forward such moves soon.

So in response to the question of have we got the balance right between research and policy, it can be concluded that we're getting there!

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