

The place of motorsport in public health: an Australian perspective

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Abstract

The sport of motor racing provides various public health messages and impacts. Positive messages include road safety campaigns aimed at discouraging drink driving. Negative messages include the sponsorship of racing teams by cigarette companies. Locating motorsport events in significant public places can magnify any health messages or impacts of motorsport in two ways. First, the total local impact of the motor racing events (e.g. through pollution or disruption to healthy modes of transport) is greater in city street circuits than in dedicated racing circuits away from urban areas. Second, the symbolic characteristics of locations with special significance and meaning can enhance the impacts on health by adding legitimacy to the events, thus helping to promote products or activities that either undermine or support public health. This paper explores the health messages and impacts of major motorsport events in Australia, and argues that the distinctive geographies of Australian motorsport work to exacerbate the negative impacts of motorsport on public health.

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Introduction

There is a growing literature which draws attention to the way in which many cities seek to enhance their image and bring renewed economic prosperity through the pursuit of major sports teams and mega-events (Cagan and deMause, 1998; Noll and Zimbalist, 1997; Hiller, 1989; Molotch, 1976; Gibson, 2004). The pursuit of major sports events is best understood as part of a larger project in which corporate and civic elites struggle to

establish, maintain, and enhance their city's status in a transnational economic and cultural hierarchy of cities (Andranovich et al., 2001). Civic leaders argue that it makes good economic and cultural 'common sense' to invest public resources in these showcase events (Lowes, 2002a; Rowe and McGuirk, 1999). One type of major sporting event that is becoming a feature of image making for cities throughout the world involves motorsport events in city street circuits in major urban public spaces.

Motorsport events freight a wide range of health messages and impacts that are not limited to the active participants (e.g. the drivers and their pit crews). The health impacts of motorsport have their biggest influence on spectators and members of the general public.

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These are, in effect, the target audiences for the corporate interests that dominate the physical and symbolic landscape of major motorsport events (such as Australia's international Formula One and Indy extravaganzas).

The health messages associated with motorsport relate to driver behaviour and road safety (Tranter and Keeffe, 2001), cigarette smoking (Chapman, 2002) and alcohol consumption (Buchanan and Lev, 1988). The health impacts of the sport are varied. While motorsport is credited with assisting the development of safety features of modern vehicles, available evidence (outlined in this paper) suggests that the total impact of motor racing on health is negative. In addition to increased risk of exposure to pollutants and disruption of medical services (Urie, 1994), research indicates that motor racing is linked with increased risk taking and accidents on public roads, as well as the numerous accidents occurring on the racing circuits (Bannerman, 2000; Arnold et al., 1989).

The location of motorsport events can compound any impact of the sport on health in two ways. First, it can increase the total local impact if an event is located in a high-density urban area. In such a location, the by-products of motor racing (e.g. air and noise pollution) impact on more people. There is also more disruption of health-promoting activity such as walking and cycling. Second, the symbolic characteristics of locations with special significance and meaning can enhance the impacts on health by adding legitimacy to motorsport events, thus helping to promote products or activities that either undermine or support public health.

The geography of motorsport in Australia differs from that in many other countries. A number of major motorsport events in Australia are staged in significant public places. While Australia does have special purpose racing circuits, major motor racing events have been held in inner city street circuits, in Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra and the Gold Coast. The Formula One Grand Prix in Melbourne (previously hosted by Adelaide) is unusual in that it is located in a high density urban area, where over 100,000 people live within 3 km of the streets used as a racing circuit, and over 30,000 live within 1 km (Urie, 1994). Most other Formula One events are located on purpose built circuits away from the centres of cities. The motor racing events in Australia's Parliamentary Zone are also unusual: it is rare for nations to allow their most significant 'national' places to become motor racing circuits.

The way in which motor sports events have taken over many significant urban public spaces in Australia is of great consequence from an ideological viewpoint. If an activity is given priority in urban spaces, this indicates that the activity is an important part of the city's culture. Staging major motorsport events in significant public places adds to the public approval of this sport, and of

its associated corporate interests. This promotes a city culture that positions the consumer above the citizen as the central point of city life (Lowes, 2002a). While commodifying public space serves the interests of dominant groups in society, it may not concord with the goal of advancing public health.

This paper examines how the geography of motor-sport events in Australia influences the public health impacts and messages of this sport. It focuses on major motor racing events held in significant urban public spaces on urban street circuits. After outlining some of the distinctive features of sport and motorsport in Australia, the paper develops an argument about the symbolic importance of a city's public spaces in terms of promoting particular discourses that may have public health impacts. The research design for the paper is then outlined, followed by a description of the health messages and impacts of motorsport in Australia. Four case studies are then used to illustrate the interplay between the health impacts and messages of Australian motorsport and the symbolic power of the city public spaces in which they have been staged.

Sport and motorsport in Australia

Sport is an integral part of Australia's national identity, and motorsport has become an important part of Australia's sports culture. Australian motorsport has grown in popularity since its beginnings in 1901 with a race for motorised tricycles in the Sydney Cricket Ground. The first four-wheeled car race was held in 1904 at Melbourne's Sandown Park, a venue that is claimed to have "the world's longest motor racing history" (Davis, 2001, p.227). Motorsport is now among the most popular spectator sports in Australia, ranking third behind Australian Rules football and horse racing in a 1999 survey (Davis, 2001). The history of motorsport in Australia (Pollard, 1996; Shepherd, 1980) parallels that of other sport in that it has grown into a fiercely competitive multi-million dollar industry, with television coverage for many of the popular motor racing events.

An important aspect of the culture of motorsport in Australia is the way that motor racing events have changed the character of particular places. Some notable examples of this are Mount Panorama near Bathurst (NSW), Albert Park in Melbourne and the Parliamentary Zone in Australia's national capital, Canberra. All of these places are now associated with the speed and daring of a particularly masculine sport. An indication of the importance of motorsport in the Australian identity is the fact that Australia's federal politicians have allowed a motor racing event, complete with alcohol advertising and sponsorship, to occur with a backdrop of the nation's Parliament House.

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