



Profiling high-range speeding offenders: Investigating criminal history, personal characteristics, traffic offences, and crash history



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ABSTRACT

This paper reports profiling information for speeding offenders and is part of a larger project that assessed the deterrent effects of increased speeding penalties in Queensland, Australia, using a total of 84,456 speeding offences. The speeding offenders were classified into three groups based on the extent and severity of an index offence: *once-only low-range offenders*; *repeat high-range offenders*; and *other offenders*. The three groups were then compared in terms of personal characteristics, traffic offences, crash history and criminal history. Results revealed a number of significant differences between *repeat high-range offenders* and those in the other two offender groups. *Repeat high-range speeding offenders* were more likely to be male, younger, hold a provisional and a motorcycle licence, to have committed a range of previous traffic offences, to have a significantly greater likelihood of crash involvement, and to have been involved in multiple-vehicle crashes than drivers in the other two offender types. Additionally, when a subset of offenders' criminal histories were examined, results revealed that *repeat high-range speeding offenders* were also more likely to have committed a previous criminal offence compared to *once only low-range* and *other offenders* and that 55.2% of the *repeat high-range offenders* had a criminal history. They were also significantly more likely to have committed drug offences and offences against order than the *once only low-range speeding offenders*, and significantly more likely to have committed regulation offences than those in the *other offenders* group. Overall, the results indicate that speeding offenders are not an homogeneous group and that, therefore, more tailored and innovative sanctions should be considered and evaluated for high-range recidivist speeders because they are a high-risk road user group.

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1. Introduction

Death and injury from speed-related crashes are a significant public health problem worldwide (Peden et al., 2004). Previous research has consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between vehicle speed and crash risk (Aarts and van Schagen, 2006; Kloeden et al., 1997), as well as crash severity, as evidenced by the greater contribution of speed to the proportion of fatal crashes compared to total crashes and those resulting in less damage or injury (Fildes et al., 2005; Keall et al., 2001). Indeed, research has suggested that exceeding the average traffic flow speed by 5 km/h in urban areas or 10 km/h in rural areas doubles the risk of a casualty crash and is equivalent to the increase in risk of crash involvement associated with operating a motor vehicle

with a blood alcohol concentration of .05 g/mL (Kloeden et al., 1997).

In Queensland in 2012, speed was reported to be a contributing factor in 21% of fatalities (Transport and Main Roads, 2014), whilst Australia-wide, speeding has been identified as a contributing factor in up to 30% of all fatal crashes (Australian Transport Council, 2011). Excessive speed and driving too fast for the conditions have also been demonstrated to be a leading contributing factor to crashes in many other countries, both developed and developing (Afukaar, 2003; Liu et al., 2005; Odero et al., 1997; Robinson and Singh, 2006; Treat et al., 1979).

1.1. Factors associated with speeding behaviour

Previous research has highlighted a myriad of factors associated with speeding behaviour including personal, social, situational and legal factors. This particular study focuses on the personal factors contributing to speeding behaviour. Past studies have found a relationship between speeding behaviour and age and gender, with higher speeds more typical among males and younger drivers

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(Stradling et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2006). A positive relationship has also been reported between speeding and crash involvement, speeding violations and other traffic violations (Brown, 2002; Parker et al., 1995; Stradling et al., 2004; Williams et al., 2006), as well as individuals with a predisposition to sensation seeking (Jonah, 1997), higher levels of perceived driving ability (Stradling et al., 2004), lower perceptions of risk (Harrison et al., 1998) and who receive greater pleasure from fast driving (Rothengatter, 1988). In addition, more favourable attitudes toward speeding have been found to be associated with greater levels of speeding and intentions to speed (Fleiter & Watson, 2006; Stradling et al., 2004). Finally, number of personality factors have also been found to be associated with a greater propensity to exceed the speed limit including Type-A personality behaviour patterns (Tay et al., 2003), higher levels of social deviance (West and Hall, 1997), perceived invulnerability and heightened internal locus of control (Corbett, 2001), authority-rebellion (Fernandes et al., 2007) and negative emotions such as anger and frustration (Fuller et al., 2008; Iversen and Rundmo, 2002).

1.2. Deterrence theory as it relates to speeding penalties

Deterrence principles underpin many road safety countermeasures and make the assumption that drivers actively consider the consequences of their actions each time they drive (Harrison, 1998; Homel, 1988). Specifically, deterrence theory posits that the influence of legal threats is based on the perceived risk of punishment, and that this risk is determined by a combination of the perceived risk of being apprehended and the perceived certainty, severity, and swiftness of legal sanctions associated with apprehension (Ross, 1982). One aspect of the theory, perceived severity of penalties, is particularly relevant to the current study which is part of a larger program of research assessing the effectiveness of speeding penalty changes among speeding offenders in the Australian state of Queensland (see below for further details). Importantly, if increases in penalties fail to alter the beliefs about the likelihood or severity of punishment, such increases are unlikely to deter speeding behaviour. Furthermore, deterrence relies not only on what potential offenders believe the risk of receiving sanctions to be, but also on how they evaluate such risks. The subjective nature of deterrence principles requires that potential offenders know about changes to sanctions and perceive such changes as producing meaningful increases to the risk of detection and punishment (von Hirsch et al., 2000). It has been suggested that offenders may not perceive deterrence principles in a homogenous manner (Fleiter et al., 2010; Freeman et al., 2006). Indeed, a recent study of serious youth offenders in two states in the US reported that more serious offenders (based on the frequency of prior offending) were more likely to report lower perceptions of the risks associated with detection and punishment, and perceive the rewards associated with offending as being greater and the costs as lower, compared to less serious offenders (Loughran et al., 2012). The authors argued that these differences create ceiling and floor effects in perceptual deterrence and help explain why more serious offenders may not be as readily deterred by enforcement and sanctions. The extent to which this applies to behaviours such as speeding is not known. As discussed in greater detail in the next section, little is currently known about different types of speeding offenders and therefore, about how penalty changes may influence them.

1.3. Speeding recidivists and high-range offenders

In many countries, including Australia, speeding drivers have traditionally been considered to be an homogeneous group (Fildes and Lee, 1993; Stead et al., 2005). However, there is a growing body

of evidence to suggest that there are sub-groups of speeding drivers. Of particular interest are recidivists, or those drivers with multiple speeding offences. This term is often used interchangeably with 'repeat offender', 'persistent offender', 'habitual offender' and 'hard core offender' and is commonly used when discussing drink driving offenders (Freeman et al., 2006; Styles et al., 2009; Yu, 2000). However, recidivism can be conceptualised in a number of different ways which have important implications for the development of countermeasures. For example, a driver who unintentionally commits two low range speeding offences could be argued to be different to a driver who persistently, intentionally and excessively exceeds speed limits. This latter type of driver might more appropriately be termed a 'persistent' or 'hard core' speeding offender.

There is also an emerging body of research investigating the characteristics and motivations of recidivist and/or high-range speeding offenders, in particular, examining the relationship between speeding and other traffic and criminal behaviour. In a pilot project of 200 drivers in Queensland who were apprehended and fined for speeding on one particular day in 1999 (termed the index offence), prior and subsequent traffic histories was analysed for a five year period either side of the index offence (Manderson et al., 2004). The presence of speed convictions in the 12 months prior to the index offence was predictive of the severity of the index offence. Those with one or more prior convictions were 2.6 times more likely to be detected exceeding the speed limit by more than 20 km/h (termed a high-speed offence) at the time of the index offence. A number of other studies have also highlighted the relationship between high-range speeding offences and a greater likelihood of subsequent speeding and other traffic offences, as well as crash involvement (Delaney et al., 2003; Lawpoolsri et al., 2007; Li et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2006).

A similar study, though not specific to speeding, was conducted in Britain to map associations between traffic offending behaviours with other criminal activity (Rose, 2000). Drivers were classified into three groups of serious traffic offenders: drink drivers, disqualified drivers, and dangerous drivers. The latter group included those who had been convicted of speeding by excessive amounts. Comparisons using criminal history data revealed that a substantial proportion of offenders from each of the three driver groups had criminal convictions. Disqualified drivers showed the most involvement with other forms of crime, followed by dangerous drivers, and then drink drivers. Similar findings were reported in a study conducted in the Australian state of Victoria that showed that 22.5% of all speeding offenders had a criminal history and that offenders with a history of other traffic-related offences were 1.5 times more likely to have committed a high-speed offence (Delaney et al., 2003).

Taken together, the research suggests that there is a positive association between certain types of traffic offending and non-traffic related histories and that serious traffic offenders, therefore, should not necessarily be thought of in isolation from other criminals. Authorities face many challenges in attempting to influence the behaviour of such groups of drivers, as there are, it seems, multiple offending behaviours to contend with. Nonetheless, a deficit remains in our knowledge of speeding recidivists and high-range offenders, including their characteristics, motivations, and intentions. In order to determine the optimal approach to developing, delivering and evaluating offender management interventions, the limited knowledge we have about speeding drivers generally, and recidivists and high-range offenders in particular, needs to be extended.

This paper examines an aspect of the data taken from a larger study evaluating the effect of speeding penalty changes on speeding recidivism in Queensland. The main aim of the larger study was to examine the effects of penalty changes (introduced in April 2003) on

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