

Essential Evidence on a page: No. 52 Is speeding a “real” anti-social behaviour?

Adrian Davis 18/03/2010

Top line: Speeding traffic is rated as the greatest antisocial behavior in local communities. On the basis of results reported in the British Crime Survey police could argue that any enforcement programme currently operating is compatible with public concern.

The evidence from driving behavior on urban roads across countries demonstrates that non-compliance with the speed limit is high. Yet the relationship between speed and crashes has been well established in the literature, with the consequence that speed reduction through enforced or other means should lead to a reduction in crashes. The extent to which the public regard speeding as a problem that requires enforcement has been less clear. One conclusion that does not obviously follow is the extent to which the public regard speeding as a problem that merits enforcement. It is likely that an effective overall strategy will require not only effective speed enforcement but also a public that is concerned about speeding.

While national media has tended to claim that speeding is less serious in relation to other crimes, and is largely anti-speed enforcement, it is questionable as to whether this accurately reflects public opinion. In contrast to many media representations, research on public attitudes towards speed and speed enforcement has, on average, been positive. Similarly opinion polls generally find widespread public support for speed cameras. However, within government there is also evidence of a persisting perception that speed cameras are controversial.

A European survey using face-to-face interviews on social attitudes to road traffic risk with just over 24,000 car drivers in 23 European countries found a high degree of public support for enforcement, with 76% of drivers in favor of more enforcement, and just over 60% agreeing or strongly agreeing that penalties for speeding should be more severe. In Britain alone, an extensive survey of driving behaviour revealed that the majority of drivers thought the 30 mph speed limit in towns were set at the correct speed (+80%), with a third of drivers thinking the 30 mph speed limit in narrow residential streets was too high.¹

Further evidence has been forthcoming through an analysis of public perceptions of antisocial behaviours including speeding traffic.² The data was collected as part of the British Crime Survey, a face-to-face interview with UK residents on issues relating to crime. An additional postal survey was conducted in two local communities in England with a response rate of 29% (1125 respondents). Analysis of data on public perceptions of antisocial behavior revealed that speeding traffic is rated as the greatest problem in local communities. Males and females both rated speeding traffic with the same degree of concern, with 30–59-year-olds and 16–29-year-olds rating it higher than the 60+ age group. Even when conducting analysis on the sub-groups, speeding traffic consistently came out as the antisocial behavior perceived to be the greatest problem, whether respondents were male or female, young, middle aged, or old.

¹ Stradling, S., et al 2003. The speeding driving: who, how and why? Scottish Executive Social Research Development Department Research Programme Research Findings 170/2003. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/08/17977/24935> .

² Poulter, D., McKenna, F. 2007 Is speeding a “real” antisocial behaviour? A comparison with other antisocial behaviours, *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 39: 384-389.