

# Road Policing: Proactive Management of Police and Media Attitudes

Inspector Carey Griffiths, New Zealand Police

*"People's perception is their reality, and they see what they want to"*

*Leon Johnston*

## Biography

Carey Griffiths joined the NZ Police in 1985, being promoted to Sergeant in 1994, Senior Sergeant in 2000, and Inspector in 2004. He has worked in a variety of front line roles, graduating as a Detective, and specialised in areas of child abuse and fraud. He also spent over 7 years as a District Court Prosecutor. He has worked in Road Policing both as the O/C Southern Highway Patrol and as Road Policing Manager for the Southern District for the last 3 ½ years.

## Abstract

*In 1992, the New Zealand Police merged with the Traffic Safety Service, making road policing enforcement the responsibility of one agency. This paper discusses the perceptions held by Police Officers about road policing duties. The distinction is drawn between the general deterrence model of road policing activity, versus the specific deterrence model of conventional "criminal policing". This paper argues that whilst there is no need to explain to the Police and the public why Police enforce to prevent crime, there is a need to explain the rationale behind the road policing enforcement programme, especially the issue of speed enforcement. This paper recommends that the philosophy behind road policing needs to be reinforced to both the Police and the public in order to change attitudes and lead to reductions in the road toll.*

## Introduction

In 1992, the New Zealand Police and Traffic Safety Service (TSS) merged. Prior to this the two organisations had quite separate roles, with the Traffic Safety Service responsible for what is commonly regarded today as "road policing".

Many Police officers until that point regarded road policing work as the property of "traffic officers". A general perception existed amongst front line Police staff that traffic duties weren't real policing, and that the merger was forced upon them. To a certain extent, these attitudes persist today.

After the merger, many Traffic Safety Service staff remained in a road policing role, despite cross-training in general duties, reinforcing the stereotype of road policing work being the sole preserve of "traffic officers".

The author was part of the general duties Police culture at that time, and observed the disparaging comments about ex-TSS staff, and the marginalisation of some, especially supervisors, as the result of the merger.

Many ex-TSS members adapted well to the change, but some simply did not cope with the demands of the new environment, reinforcing the stereotypical view that they weren't competent to do "police work". The degree of adaptation came largely down to the personal skills of the individual as opposed to any preparation for the role.

Whilst more than 13 years have now passed since the merger, and traffic-related activities are now performed by police officers, the sense of negative attitudes towards this area of police activity persists. The need to counter these attitudes was a major reason why the term "traffic safety" was altered to "road policing" by the Board of Commissioners in February 2002 to better reflect the nature of the activity.

### **Paradigm of enforcement**

Homel (1998) discussed the concept of general versus specific deterrence in the road policing context. Prior to 1992, NZ general duties police operated within a model of specific deterrence, with enforcement aimed at a specific group of mainly criminal offenders. Police officers did not need any specific training to recognise that violent offending, disorder, dishonesty, sexual offending and other offences were unacceptable, and those targeted were quite rightly labelled, (and easily so), as criminals. Similarly, the general public did not need any specific information in order to understand why Police were targeting criminal offences. The criminal acts in themselves were self-explanatory.

The general (non-criminal) public rarely came into contact with Police Officers prior to 1992 in any capacity other than as victims or witnesses. Prior to 1992, Police officers were not even issued with ticket books, (unlike their TSS counterparts), and ticket writing was simply not part of the New Zealand Police culture.

Whilst criminal behaviour is easily compartmentalised, road trauma exists across all strata of society and poor driver behaviour is a societal problem across every strata. As Homel (1998) identified, in order to change behaviours, the offending group must be targeted. Whilst this just meant criminals in the general duties environment, in the road policing environment it meant that enforcement efforts not only targeted "criminals", but also included the general public who were offending - the group previously left untouched by Police.

There was little, if any, training offered on the rationale behind writing tickets, it was simply an increased demand placed on Police, many of whom saw little correlation between tickets and the road toll. Many staff at that time regarded tickets as "punishment", and not as a lever to change behaviours. This is a paradigm shift in thinking, and not one easily explained.

The result of this shift meant that Police Officers who had hitherto left the general public untouched were suddenly expected to deal with them as offenders (albeit minor offenders). This was strongly resisted by many Police, who commented that:

- ticket writing was beneath them and "not what they joined the Police to do";
- ticket writing would alienate the public and prevent them coming forward as witnesses;
- ticket writing would damage jury verdicts (this was an especially common complaint from members of the Criminal Investigation Branch)

Needless to say, the concerns expressed above have never eventuated, although there is a fair amount of rhetoric, largely based on a lack of knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Performance management became a lever to get staff to write tickets, resulting in some criticisms from both Police Officers and public quarters. Many of these criticisms and concerns were publicly aired in the internal Police Association newsletter, ultimately finding their way into the public arena.

Through the mid-90s, many staff involved in road policing, especially at supervisory level, were ex-TSS. Managers became increasingly focused on outputs as a means of enforcing outcomes, which, in the absence of information to the contrary, had the unfortunate effect of driving a perception of outputs, (i.e. ticket numbers), being the prime focus.

A focus on outputs can have negative consequences, especially if attention is not drawn to the result of those outputs in terms of desired outcomes. The New Zealand Police have a series of output measures across a large range of activities, both criminal and traffic, and it is often observed that some staff and managers regard the achievement of outputs as a measure of success. This regard been described in a Report to the Australian Public Service Commission (2004) as "Goal Displacement":

*"whereby attention is focussed on achieving specific and measurable performance indicator targets rather than operating more broadly in the interests of achieving outcomes."*

Media attention is often focused on Police staff achieving mythical "quotas", and care has to be taken that Police outputs are not seen as the end result of enforcement activity, alienating public support.

### **Public and police perceptions**

As Police have focused enforcement efforts on reducing the high New Zealand Road toll, great success has been had in contributing towards dropping the numbers of deaths from a peak in 1987 of 795 people, to 436 in 2004<sup>2</sup>. This has, however, resulted in a greater number of public contacts as Police staff are expected to deal with every offence they detect regardless of who commits it.

As the general public began to come increasingly into contact with Police, they were unable to draw the distinction between "traffic duties" and "normal Police duties", as the officers all wear the same uniform. Experiences with Police who did not have the

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<sup>1</sup> Annual public attitudes surveys show that public support remains high. A detailed analysis is available at: < <http://www.ltsa.govt.nz/publications/public-attitudes/2004.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Statistics ex Land Transport New Zealand, at < <http://www.ltsa.govt.nz/research/fatal5yr.html>>

necessary training or skills in the rationale behind road policing enforcement activity were sometimes not positive. Common themes began to develop in the media, namely:

- the Police were "criminalising" the general public;
- the Police were simply "revenue gathering" and "quota driven";
- the Police were ignoring other offences as motorists were an "easy target";
- that resources were inequitably spread between the branches with too great a focus on traffic;
- the Police were turning against each other as a result.

This latter theme was supported by some ill-considered public comments from some Police staff who felt that road policing was not what they wanted to do. A lack of consistent training on the philosophy behind road policing meant that staff were ill-equipped to deal with criticism from the public, and many simply did not believe in what they were being asked to do.

In essence, in the absence of training to the contrary, Police staff simply reflect the opinions of their peer group, which in turn, are strongly affected by the media. It is argued that unless Police and partner agencies take a leadership role in supporting controversial enforcement activities, the only information consistently provided is negative and has no evidential basis.

The media have capitalised on this internal dissent, frequently publishing criticisms of Police both by the public and from within Police ranks. This occurred despite public attitude surveys by the National Research Bureau on behalf of Land Transport New Zealand in 2003 and 2004 showing that the majority of the public supported existing police road enforcement levels or wanted more.<sup>3</sup> Reading newspaper headlines or letters to the editor painted a vastly different picture to the actual surveys of what was essentially a very quiet (yet supportive) mainstream New Zealand.

What was apparent is that there was a very vocal minority who were against road policing activity, but who were dominating the media and capitalising on internal Police dissent. This problem has worsened in 2005, with an election year in progress. Politicians have now stepped into the fray, criticising Police enforcement efforts as being revenue gathering for the Government.

Research in the UK by Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) commented that the Police, like other agencies in the public sector, would need to develop competitive strategies for media attention if they wished to survive in an increasingly hostile political environment. (See also Boyle [1999]). This is certainly no different in New Zealand, and it is clear that media strategies require further attention.

Road Policing staff have felt this pressure significantly, with attacks in the media intensifying. Anecdote started to come in regarding members and supervisors who were starting to question if what they were doing was right, and overall performance nationally started to flatten. A perception was apparently starting to develop (in the minds of both public and some front-line officers) that bore no resemblance to the

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<sup>3</sup> Available at: < <http://www.ltsa.govt.nz/publications/public-attitudes/2004.html>>

reality, and reflects a form of perceptual defence, described by Shriberg et al (1990, pg 68) as occurring when *"we distort or deny something that is too difficult to acknowledge"*.

A real danger is that unchallenged anecdote will become the "reality" for both Police staff and the public, causing Police Officers to "back away" from essential tasks as the result.

### **Police management of perceptions at a national level**

Traditionally, the New Zealand Police have been quite neutral in terms of a pro-active media strategy. A significant proportion of media material from Police is in response to either an incident or a criticism of some police operation or tactics. There has been some media activity for road policing nationally via the Media Services group, who have mainly printed materials for internal publication, or addressed issues as they arose. Whilst any information is useful, it is argued that this doesn't go far enough.

The New Zealand Police are in partnership with Land Transport New Zealand<sup>4</sup> who are responsible for producing the bulk of public advertising for road safety. Most of the advertising is aimed at particular road safety messages, such as speed, alcohol, restraints and, latterly, intersection behaviours, and generally targets overt driver behaviours. The risks of low level speeding<sup>5</sup>, for example, are not explained to any significant degree.

Whilst New Zealand have followed to a large extent the successes of the Victorian Speed enforcement programme, the instructional material released by the TAC<sup>6</sup> to provide the rationale behind the speed enforcement programme has been largely lacking. Johnston (2004) outlined that the TAC "Wipe off 5" campaign followed three main phases:

1. Enforcement: increase awareness of chance of detection (early 2001)
2. Instructional: provide rationale (mid 2002)
3. Emotive: provide moral case (2003)

It is argued that the provision of the rationale behind New Zealand's equivalent to "Wipe off 5" has been lacking, and that, in part, has contributed to criticisms as described.

Whilst it is not necessary to rationalise a link between cause and effect for drinking and driving, failure to give way, failure to wear restraints and high level speeding, there has been virtually no information about low level speeding, and nothing to support Police activities in this area.

Most reasonable members of the public agree that high speeds kill, but there remains little understanding of the overall risks placed by a population which habitually

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<sup>4</sup> New Zealand Police's primary partner in Road Safety, they deal primarily with the educative side of road safety, and were called the Land Transport Safety Authority until the 2004 merger with Transfund NZ.

<sup>5</sup> Low level speeding is regarded by the NZ Police as speeds up to 15 km/hr over a posted limit

<sup>6</sup> Transport Accident Commission - similar to Land Transport New Zealand in operation

speeds at lower levels. Much of the criticism of Police has been aimed at what is seen as "petty policing", with little effort to address this systematically either to the public or to Police staff.

A good example is seen in the current outrage against "boy racer" activity, where there are calls to deal with top end speeds, but no support for enforcement in what is actually the bulk of the offending behaviour.

### **Southern District's management of media and staff perceptions**

In the Southern Police District, success has been had across a variety of fronts. The first has involved proactive media releases by the Road Policing Manager on a variety of issues, including the rationale behind the speed enforcement programme. This has resulted in full page articles covering this issue in depth, provoking intelligent debate in local newspapers. It has been immediately obvious that this has met with support, as the habitual letter writers are starting to have responses aimed at them from the "silent majority" criticising them for their comments - in other words, the "vocal minority" is starting to have some pressure placed upon them.

The second front is proactively getting into the media through as many methods as possible. Both the Road Policing Manager and the Officer in Charge of the Highway Patrol appear on regular talkback radio shows and local television to explain what is happening in road policing terms across the local community. The Road Policing Manager has also committed to staff that he will be the first to get up and challenge negative media in an active way, as it is recognised that if baseless rhetoric is left unchallenged, it can become reality.

The third front has consisted of a series of seminars across the District for the last 3 years, explaining the rationale behind enforcement activities to all Police staff and supervisors. This has been particularly important as it has helped lever a change in attitudes and behaviours of front line staff. What was particularly positive was the anecdote from road policing staff that they are now better equipped to deal with criticisms both at a personal and a professional level. Also apparent from this is that there is a far better relationship between the various branches of Police, as staff start to understand the link between enforcement and drops in road trauma, and see the application to the police message of keeping communities safe. This series of seminars has led to regular presentations to NCO qualifying courses at the Royal New Zealand Police College on the philosophy behind road policing, something previously left unaddressed in any systematic way.

In 2004, presentations were supported by Professor Ian Johnston from Monash University's Accident Research Centre, and Dr. Paul Graham from the Land Transport Safety Authority, both of whom presented together with Police managers at a series of seminars through the Southern Police District. These presentations were aimed specifically at drawing a link between enforcement activities and drops in road trauma. A Police-developed poster outlining key messages also supported this initiative. (Copy attached as Appendix "A".)

Feedback and anecdote from these approaches shows that a consistent message aimed at drawing the link between enforcement activity and drops in road trauma is

especially effective, not only for Police staff, but for the public. A consistent comment is that these links are not being consistently drawn at a national level with current training, advertising or media releases. What material is released depends markedly on local managers.

### **Results in Southern**

Media attacks on road policing in Southern have remained almost non-existent, despite the nation-wide trend. Letters to the editor in local papers are increasingly balanced with competing views, staff from the various branches cooperate and assist one another, and there is improving understanding district-wide on the rationale behind the road policing enforcement programme, with good commitment from supervisors.

Staff have commented that they are able to respond constructively to verbal criticisms, and it is rare to receive public complaints about road policing enforcement.

Road policing is no longer stigmatised and there are numerous applicants for vacancies from a variety of branches - in fact General Duties staff now see road policing as an attractive option, and most of the specialist road policing supervisors in Southern (Highway Patrol, Strategic Traffic Unit and Traffic Alcohol groups) come from a General Duties background.

The current road toll in Southern is sitting at its lowest ever level - as at July 2005, fatal crashes were 44.2% of the 3 year average, with fatalities at the lowest ever level at 40% of the 3 year average. No direct link between the suggested media strategy and fatalities is yet established, and this is an area that would benefit from further research. The increased focus on changing road user behaviour through consistent application of the law is most likely a contributing factor in this success, and the District prides itself on having a consistent approach across both traffic and general duties staff.

### **Future directions for a nationally consistent approach**

Southern's results support the proposition that dynamic leadership in this area is required to ensure that anecdote does not become reality. As Murray (2000) proposed, leaders need to impart a vision to their followers and have the interpersonal and communication skills to persuade others to their cause.

The process of managing and changing attitudes is one of transformational change, and Eisenbach *et al* (1999, p 85) in a review of the literature commented that in order to attract followers to different change possibilities, the leaders must "*craft an appealing vision that takes into consideration the underlying needs and values of the key stakeholders.*"

It is therefore recommended that a national coordinated response be implemented following the successful principles adopted by Southern District, namely:

1. Media management should be more proactive

Media strategies should actively address the areas of common criticism, particularly low level speeding and trauma promoting offences. (There is little debate about drink-driving or seatbelt wearing or "serious" offences). More use should be made of media services to actively promote road policing philosophy.

Stewart (1999) commented that policy practitioners must be prepared for media attention in controversial areas and should take steps to manage media relations like those of any other stakeholder. Development of this theme at a national level will provide greater consistency than is the case at present;

2. Advertising should be aimed at not only convincing the public, but supporting the activities of Police by providing a logical explanation for enforcement activity

Areas where Police are being criticised should be actively supported by advertising, both from within the Police, and through partner agencies, such as Land Transport New Zealand, ACC and other partners. The public need to know why they get a ticket at 111km/hr on an open highway. The issue does not arise at 130 km/hr, but that is the area where current advertising tends to point. A recent advertisement (ex Australia) showing Professor Ian Johnston from MUARC<sup>7</sup> illustrating the difference between cars speeding at 60 km/hr and 65 km/hr met with significant approval from both Police staff and many members of the public who said they appreciated seeing the rationale behind enforcement activity at lower speeds.

Support has also been apparent for local demonstrations of cars travelling at 50 km/hr and 60 km/hr braking to avoid a cardboard cut-out of a child emerging onto the road.<sup>8</sup> Again, a consistent approach will provide a greater rationale as to the purpose of enforcement activities;

3. Key staff should be trained on how to clearly articulate the road policing philosophy message which should be regularly presented to Police staff and public groups. Leadership in this area should be strongly emphasised

There is still a shortage of key presenters on this issue, although several Police Districts have developed their own presentations. There is scope for the development of a national approach to this issue - especially in terms of recruit or advanced course training.

A consistent national approach needs to be adopted and staff trained accordingly. Presentations by the author to NCO qualifying courses at the Royal New Zealand Police College have been very effective as they reach a broad cross-section of Police staff who would otherwise not be involved in road policing but who may be involved in criticism as the result of ignorance of key principles.

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<sup>7</sup> Monash University Accident Research Centre

<sup>8</sup> This type of advertisement appeared in Australia in 2002 using Professor Jack McLean.

Training in this area should form a regular part of recruit and advanced training. Currently recruits receive some operational training, but little in the area of supporting philosophy. As a group they are the most likely to be involved in issuing tickets early in their careers. Training of the recruit instructors in road policing philosophy would be useful as there are a variety of personal attitudes being inconsistently communicated to junior Police staff at a very impressionable period in their careers.

In short, to use a well-used saying:

*"If you teach people the why, the how will take care of itself"*

## Summary

A change in the media strategy to target the rationale behind police activities is necessary to support Police staff in delivering existing enforcement activities by providing a credible explanation in the public realm. There should be development of a consistent model to deliver the road policing philosophy message to key groups.

The challenge to both Police and partner agencies is to provide coordinated support for enforcement activity in contentious areas such as low level speeding.

The consequences of failing to do this are likely to see increased tension between branches of policing, and an increasingly hostile media environment leading to possible reductions in public support for efforts to continue to reduce the road toll.

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**Key Words**

Enforcement, Strategy, Media, Road Policing, Attitudes, Training



# Crash Reduction Key Messages

## What

**Speed** – don't tolerate low level speeding

**Alcohol** – breath test everyone stopped

**Restraints** – actively seek out offending

**Trauma Promoting Behaviours** – be firm on offending that can maim

## Where

**Urban** Urban speeds, restraints, alcohol and intersections

**Rural** Speed and alcohol

## Who

**Be consistent across the whole population**

## How

**"See Something, Do Something"**

Deal with every offence detected in accordance with policy



## Why

**Proactive enforcement**

**changed behaviours**

**reduced deaths and injuries**

Internationally, road deaths are the most common cause of death in the first 5 decades of life. They kill more people than wars, terrorism or homicide.

(Professor Ian Johnston - MUARC)

**FOCUS ON REDUCING DEATH AND INJURY  
IN OUR COMMUNITY**

***"Safer Communities Together"***