

Highway Criminal Interdiction in Australia: Victoria Police Crime And Traffic Connecting on Highways (C.A.T.C.H.)

Superintendent Michael Sayer

Victoria Police, Australia

Email for correspondence: michael.sayer@police.vic.gov.au

Abstract

Highway Criminal Interdiction is a law enforcement strategy which enhances police officers' observational, conversational, listening and investigative skills when intercepting and searching vehicles.

Highway Criminal Interdiction has been extremely effective across Canada and North America over the past 20 years as a means of interrupting criminal activity on roads. In Canada alone, the strategy has resulted in contraband and drugs seizures in excess of \$4 Billion. The strategy involves training law enforcement officers to identify indicators of criminal behaviour and increase their observational, conversational, listening and investigative skills during a vehicle intercept. This strategy was introduced to Australia by Victoria Police in 2010 and titled 'Crime and Traffic Connecting on Highways' (C.A.T.C.H.). This strategy has significantly impacted on road policing and other criminal activity.

Since introduction to Victoria Police, C.A.T.C.H. training has been delivered to 3,000 law enforcement officers from Australian Customs and Border Protection Service and the Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland Police Services. Detections of criminal behaviour on Australian highways as a result of C.A.T.C.H. range from high risk driving behaviours through to large seizures of drugs and other contraband. Total seizures to date amount to \$37 million and climbing.

C.A.T.C.H. provides law enforcement agencies with a significant tool in efforts to disrupt criminal activity because at some point criminals and their activities are on our roadways.

Key words: CATCH; Highway; Interdiction; Law Enforcement.

1. Introduction

Operation 'Pipeline' is a law enforcement strategy in North America and Canada that increases a police officer's investigational, conversational and awareness skills in order to target, intercept and search vehicles carrying contraband. The strategy involves high visible enforcement activity with a focus on increased traffic stops by police. This highly successful highway criminal interdiction program has been responsible for the detection of high risk road users for offences including driving under the influence of alcohol and other drugs, disqualified driving, and exceeding the speed limit. It has also resulted in the seizure of approximately \$4 billion of contraband including drugs, cash, tobacco and liquor in Canada alone.

1.1 The Problem

Do we have a problem with illicit drugs within Australia? The Australian Crime Commission (ACC) Illicit Drug Data Report 2010–11 reported that over 9.3 tonnes of illicit drugs were seized nationally in 2010–11, this represented a 19 per cent increase from the 7.8 tonnes in 2009–10. It also reported that the number of illicit drug seizures nationally had also

increased, from 63,670 in 2009–10 to 69,595 in 2010–11 which is the highest recorded in the last decade (Australian Crime Commission 2012).

There is significant evidence of illicit drugs and other contraband being smuggled into Australia with the increase in seizures made at the borders. Examples of this can be found in the news media regularly. In October 2010, Australian Federal Police and Australian Customs and Border Protection Service apprehended a mother and son who had attempted to smuggle a massive shipment of heroin into Australia with a potential street value of \$400 million. The heroin was hidden in a container load of wooden door frames (Morgan 2010). A further example in the same month, came from Queensland where Australian Federal Police and Australian Customs and Border Protection Service seized 464 kilos of cocaine from a yacht berthed at a marina, just north of Brisbane (News.com.au 2010). In May 2012 in Brisbane, police seized a shipping container which contained 20kg of high-grade heroin concealed inside sports bags. The seizure had been smuggled from Thailand.

However we are only seizing a small portion of those illicit drugs that come across our borders and this was recently supported by Mr John Lawler APM, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Crime Commission (ACC) who publically stated that illicit drugs are getting into Australia undetected (McKenzie & Beck 2011).

Further to this are the findings of a Sun-Herald investigation into the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service which revealed that the number of containers inspected by Customs over the past three years are fewer than 1 per cent (O'Brien 2012). In 2010-11 financial year this amounted to 14,227 sea containers (Australian Customs and Border Protection Service 2011). The department has seized 40 suspicious containers in the past three years (O'Brien 2012).

To further evidence the extent of this illicit drug smuggling, in May 2012, The Australian Crime Commission published its Illicit Drug Data Report 2010–11. This reports that number of 'amphetamine-type stimulants (excluding MDMA2) detections at the Australian border increased by 60 per cent in 2010–11 which is the highest recorded in the last decade (Australian Crime Commission 2012).

The reality is that law enforcement agencies seize only a small percentage of the contraband that comes into the country.

The next question is, how do these illicit drugs and other smuggled contraband get from our borders to the end user? The answer is, by some form of transport where at some point these goods will end up on our highways. In the absence of any other intelligence, how do law enforcement agencies detect these illicit drugs being transported from the borders and into our cities?

The use of highway criminal interdiction provides frontline police with the skills and knowledge to identify travelling criminals. The principles utilised in this strategy do not discriminate and will identify high risk drivers, such as disqualified and drink/drug drivers through to terrorists and murderers using our roadways. The acknowledgement of highway criminal interdiction as an effective tool to not only disrupt criminal activity, but also to increase road safety is essential to understanding the overall benefits of the strategy and part of this is understanding the linkages between criminals and deviant driver behaviour.

Criminal activity and serious traffic offending are not two separate streams of behaviour and the linkages between both have been reported in literature internationally. A study commissioned by the Home Office in 2003 found links between serious traffic offending and criminal offending. It also found that the extent of these linkages varied between types of high risk driving with 79% of disqualified drivers having criminal histories (Rose 2000). Further support is drawn from a study by New Zealand Police in 2004 where it identified that those who commit serious offences on the roadways often commit crime (Van Der Heyden 2004).

2. The Strategy

In November 2008, Staff Sergeant Rob Ruiters of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) was invited to Victoria as guest speaker at the Vision 237 Traffic Conference to brief Victoria Police on Operation Pipeline with a view of implementing this strategy within Victoria. As a result of this visit and work by a Victoria Police Project Group, a proposal was developed to introduce the concept of Operation Pipeline to Victoria Police with an initial pilot in the South East Region. Funding was approved via the Chief Commissioner of Police Innovation Fund and in June 2009, three members of the RCMP attended in Victoria and delivered the 2 day training program to 274 Victoria Police members. These members were from road policing, general duties, crime, and specialist areas, with the majority of participants from the South Eastern Region. A further 20 members were trained as trainers for the program titled 'CATCH' (Crime and Traffic Connecting on Highways).

Victoria Police CATCH was developed as a law enforcement strategy which, through training, enhances police officers' observational, conversational and investigative skills when intercepting and searching vehicles. It is best described as a fundamental approach to policing. Operation Pipeline was renamed to CATCH (Crime And Traffic Connecting on Highways) in order to apply a Victoria Police and uniquely Australian brand to the operational strategy. It was piloted within the South East Region of Victoria between 1st July and 31st December, 2009. Although still in its infancy, CATCH has significantly impacted on policing areas such as crime, road policing and counter terrorism. It also encourages different work units such as the highway patrol, crime investigation units and general duties to more effectively and efficiently work together to combat the major policing priorities of road trauma and crime with these members working together from the identification of travelling criminals, to the ensuing investigations.

2.1 How it Works – Summary of Criminal Interdiction

This strategy is based upon challenging members to treat every interception as the most important interception they have ever done in their operational career. This is instead of adopting a 'same old same old' approach when conducting a traffic stop. In approaching this daily task with this mindset, it prompts members to use their observational, conversational, listening and investigatory skills in order to develop a clear set of observations that can be taken forward to investigating criminal activity on our roads. The training encourages members to quickly identify the subtle yet clear indicators present during these types of interceptions and to couple these indicators together in an unassuming manner that is undetectable by the persons intercepted.

The program has a key focus on significantly disrupting what has been up until now, a largely uninterrupted industry of moving drugs and cash at will within the community. It recognises that at some point the vast majority of contraband, in particular illicit drugs, spends a period of time in vehicles on public roads. The potential community savings in reducing the direct impacts of criminal behaviour are inestimable.

The strategy focuses on high visibility police enforcement activity on the roadways. It encourages high rates of traffic stops where officers use their observational, conversational, and investigative skills to identify criminality. Officers learn very quickly that the program is not just about detecting contraband couriers with the indicators identifying traffic and other criminal offences.

These indicators were developed by law enforcement officers in the United States who in the 1980's very quickly observed that travelling criminals shared many characteristics,

tendencies, and methods. Indicators are best described as abnormalities, observed during an intercept by the police officer.

Indicators work like a 'paint by numbers picture', the more of the numbers you paint, the clearer the picture becomes. Likewise, the more indicators an officer observes, the clearer their activity becomes.

There are a number of indicators common to the majority of intercepts of travelling criminals and these are,

- Masking Agents – used to disguise the odour of the contraband
- Third Party Rental – vehicle rented by a third party
- Lived in Appearance – vehicle that appears as if the occupants have been eating, sleeping in it

At least one of these is almost guaranteed to be present when there is criminal behaviour. There are many more indicators which are covered in the training package delivered to law enforcement officers.

An example of the indicators is where a marked police vehicle is parked on the side of a highway in a highly visible position. Drivers travelling along that highway generally react to the presence of the police vehicle in a similar manner with each driver reducing speed and looking at the police vehicle as they pass. This is normal behaviour; however the driver that passes, staring straight ahead and placing his head behind the centre pillar so that the officer cannot see him is the driver with something to hide. This behaviour may be quite legitimate on its own, however once intercepted, the officer will look for other indicators through observations and interview of the driver which may lead to identification of the reason that the driver behaved in that manner. In this example it could have been anything from drink driving, unregistered motor vehicle, to concealing evidence of a murder.

Law enforcement officers who police the roadways are best placed to know what the behaviours of the normal travelling public are and when they see anomalies, their skills in criminal interdiction come into play.

2.2 Training

A customised Victoria Police CATCH training package has been developed and implemented. This has been very well received. Comments such as "*in 19 years of policing I have never attended such a valuable and practical course*" and "*it makes me think of things I should've done at recent intercepts and conducting searches*" (Victoria Police 2010) is a common theme. Feedback of this nature indicates that there is a demonstrable need for operational police to be CATCH trained. The CATCH principles have been introduced to police recruit training and are delivered during the 3rd and final phase of Foundation Training at the Victoria Police Academy approximately 18 months after graduation. It was important to understand that in North America this type of training is not delivered until police officers have at least two years' experience. This practice evolved as it was learned that police need to understand and recognise 'norms' before they could identify 'abnormal' behaviour. This lesson is important to remember because it is very common for people exposed to this training to instantly assume it should be taught in recruit training; to do so would be a mistake. It has also been customised and pitched for delivery to operational members throughout Victoria and other states of Australia by qualified CATCH instructors.

One of the most remarkable features of this training is its simplicity. The 'back to basics' approach to operational policing that seems to have been inadvertently 'bred out' of a lot of front line operational members. The key to this training is to heighten the skills of members in their ability to more closely interpret the subtle nuances in behaviour whilst being spoken

to by police. It also challenges and encourages police to heighten their observational and listening skills.

The observation that these fundamental skills appear to have been 'bred out' of operational officers is not a criticism of current practice. It is an observation that even with the organisational intentions of trying to provide the best resources and technology possible to front line members – it comes at a price of potentially losing some of our policing intuition. A great deal of informal feedback provided to the Victoria Police Project Group was that police officers appear to have lost the ability to interact with suspects and have often simply moved through a process of automation (for example writing out a ticket) and then moving to the next booking. Many anecdotes have been told that police officers are regularly simply checking a vehicle for current registration and / or if stolen via a mobile data terminal without looking for indicators of potential criminal behaviour (Victoria Police 2012). Dr. Ron Martinelli, noted US forensic and police practices expert was reported in *Police: The Law Enforcement Magazine*, commenting on the use of technology in policing where he stated, *"Even in these technologically advanced ages, law enforcement is ultimately and will always be about people and relationships: the ability to talk to people, the ability to engage people,..."* (Scoville 2011). To some extent it appears that the greater the availability of technology, the less we are using our cognitive ability. This training aims at reigniting an officer's interest and desire for keen observation, intercepting vehicles and speaking with drivers and occupants of vehicles that raise their suspicion.

The training involves delivery of a range of topics including, roadside interview techniques, identification of criminal indicators, concealment locations, heavy vehicles, and relative legislative and policy requirements.

As at May 2012, Victoria Police has trained in excess of 3,000 police officers. New South Wales Police has also commenced a state-wide roll out of CATCH. Queensland Police has commenced piloting the strategy. Training has been delivered to other Australian law enforcement agencies including the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service.

3. Results

Within a very short time of commencing the pilot, seizures of contraband were made by CATCH trained members. These seizures have included illicit drugs, weapons, fraudulent documents/credit cards, explosives, stolen goods, and child pornography. An increase in vehicle intercepts and resulting traffic offences was very evident. A street value has been placed against the illicit drugs and stolen goods which to May 2012, exceeds \$37million and continues to climb. The interesting observation was that the very same indicators and techniques for concealment as seen in North America and Canada were also being observed in the Australian detections.

3.1 Road Safety

The impact of this strategy on road safety is more difficult to measure as evaluations of criminal interdiction world-wide have not taken into account measuring the outcomes to road safety. It is clear from research that high visible police enforcement activity on roadways has a positive impact upon road safety. The 1994 review of traffic enforcement literature sponsored by the Institute for Road Safety Research identified that increased traffic policing activity together with highly visible enforcement, increases the risk of detection and has an impact on driver behaviour (Zaal 1994). In fact the long term benefits for road safety from criminal interdiction come from the increased visible presence of policing activity with officers intercepting vehicles, speaking with drivers on the side of the roadway and each and every passing motorist observing that activity. Highway criminal interdiction is employed by

officers each time they perform traffic related duties, and not a short term targeted enforcement activity. As such it has a greater impact on altering long term driver behaviour. This is supported by Harper (1991 cited in Zaal, 1994, p.10) that long term enforcement strategies will have a greater impact on deviant road user behaviour.

Since commencing the CATCH training, Victoria and New South Wales Police have seen increased confidence of officers in intercepting heavy vehicles through an increased understand of regulations and powers. Heavy vehicles are over represented in road trauma making up 3% of the vehicle fleet, however they are involved in 18 per cent of all road fatalities (ANZPAA 2011) with drivers linked to illicit drug use. In Victoria alone, heavy vehicles made up 10% of vehicles intercepted with offences detected since the commencement of the program.

3.2 Business Change

A further and equally significant outcome of this initiative is that it challenges all traditional policing silos to join together to achieve an overall outcome. In so doing it provides an excellent opportunity for Victoria Police and other agencies to reduce incidents of crime, road trauma, counter terrorism and public order. The CATCH principles do not discriminate; the indicators of criminal behaviour identify illegal activity from disqualified drivers and drink drivers to the most serious of criminal offences.

Application of CATCH principles is a committed strategic decision to combat four key areas of service delivery to the communities in which it is applied. Those being:

- **Crime:** Increased intercepts and searches of vehicles leads to higher detection of stolen goods, drugs and other contraband. This will restrict criminal's use of the roads and greatly enhance our ability to locate fugitives and recidivist offenders.
- **Community Safety:** Increased activity significantly assists in heightening public perception that the police are very visibly engaged in making the community safer.
- **Road Policing:** Increased vehicle (car & truck) intercepts leads to higher police visibility, traffic offences detected and a subsequent reduction of road trauma.
- **Counter Terrorism:** Increased intercepts and searches lead to greater intelligence gathering and detection of offences and prevention of terrorist acts.

3.3 Police Cultural Change

The CATCH initiative provides law enforcement agencies with a single strategy that involves all of the key policing imperatives (Road Policing, Crime & Public Order) joining together to achieve a positive outcome. It provides an excellent opportunity for law enforcement agencies to detect offenders; reduce crime and address road trauma.

A comment from the Police Commander from a CATCH Operation sums up how the initiative is impacting on police culture; *"The feedback from the members who participated was excellent, all are keen to be involved in future operations and stated that they enjoyed working with the different units, (eg. Highway Patrol, Criminal Investigation, Special Duties) and learnt a little more about each-others specialist areas. It was fun to watch the detectives inside the front cab of a semi and issuing NOU's (Notice of Unroadworthiness) with assistance from the Highway Patrol"*(Victoria Police 2010). This comment is indicative of the police cultural issues identified and overcome by members' participating in CATCH operations.

4. Conclusion

CATCH has been an exciting and challenging initiative for Victoria Police. It has resulted in significant seizures of illicit drugs and other contraband exceeding \$37 million in value whilst also delivering road safety outcomes. Although the focus is on the identification of illicit contraband on our roadways this enforcement activity is not mutually exclusive to the road safety outcomes with high visibility enforcement and increased traffic stops. The key to this initiative is that it challenges all of the traditional policing silos to join together to achieve an overall outcome and in so doing it has provided an excellent opportunity for Victoria Police to reduce both road trauma and crime.

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