

# A road toll is not inevitable



A recent Australasian Traffic Police Forum (ATPF) in Canberra further strengthened the ACT Policing resolve to minimise harm on local roads, with its current road toll reduction strategy seeing a significant drop in road trauma. The ATPF, which responds to community concerns about road safety, met for the first time in Canberra this April, with heads of traffic teams nationwide, and representatives from Fiji and New Zealand, discussing ways of making the road safer.

The twice-yearly forum presents an opportunity for each police service to learn from each other's experiences, including means of road fatality reduction. Last year, 26 people died on Canberra roads — a steep increase from 10 the year before. Fortunately in 2006 there has been a dramatic reduction in both fatalities and serious injuries on the ACT's roads, however the message remains not to be complacent, and to never accept a road toll as inevitable.



Breath testing forms an important part of the road safety strategy.

“Nothing can be more important to police — and the wider community — than reducing the fatality rate,” Detective Superintendent Michael Chew, who heads ACT Policing’s Traffic Operations Team, said.

“We tackle this important issue with a variety of tools – new technology, high visibility targeted policing campaigns, relationships with external agencies such as the NRMA Road Safety Trust, the community, government departments and the media, as well as cross-jurisdictional operations”.

## The media

The media is an important tool in the ACT’s overall approach to road safety as it is a major element in educating the community. Detective Superintendent Chew says police never lose sight of the fact each fatality carries with it a lifetime of grief for the friends and families of victims. “With this in mind,

ACT Policing makes an effort to convey to the community, through the media, the message that a fatality affects the community for generations to come,” he said.

While the significance of the human tragedy in road trauma doesn’t need to be spelled out, the financial burden to the community at large is also striking. The National Road Safety Strategy estimates an annual cost of \$15 billion in road accident-related expenditure. The strategy aims to directly attack this human and financial cost, with its three-tiered approach of safe roads, safe drivers and safe cars.

## Safe drivers, safe cars

“From a policing perspective, the focus is on driver behaviour and vehicle roadworthiness, through operations such as the ACT’s Easter traffic safety campaign, which saw almost 3000 random breath tests conducted over

the four-day period, with 17 drivers charged with drink-driving offences after returning positive screenings,” Detective Superintendent Chew said.

“While we are happy with the results we achieved over Easter, the fact that 17 people were charged with drink driving means people are still putting their lives and the lives of other road users in danger”. He also added a word of warning to those not heeding the message: “With the increased presence of police on the roads, motorists who continue to drink and drive run the risk of getting caught. Police can’t be everywhere at every time, but if you drink and drive, one day something will stop you and that’s either going to be the police or a collision. We want it to be us.”

The road safety message cannot be overstated. Studies have shown an increase of only a few kilometres per hour can have a major impact on the





Photo: Brian Hartigan



Constable Angela Smith, left, says she gained a better understanding of policing during her stint in Traffic Operations.



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incidence of serious crashes. On urban main roads with 60km per hour limits, the risk of involvement in a serious injury crash has been found to double with each increase of 5km per hour above the speed limit.

Monash University's Accident Research Centre conducted a study of driver attitude towards speed, and found a high number of motorists did not believe it to be dangerous to travel 30km per hour above the posted speed limits. While not surprising to some, the study provided statistical data to show that younger drivers (those under 34-years-old) were more likely to exceed the speed limit and be excessively fast drivers at all locations. Older drivers (over 45-years-old) were more likely

to be below the speed limit and to be excessively slow motorists.

While studies such as this are regularly conducted by research centres worldwide, the less formal sort of study conducted by police on the road can produce results just as beneficial to intelligence-led policing.

"It's crucial for police to be on the roads at the high volume traffic times," Detective Superintendent Chew said.

"We make our own observations of traffic 'hot spots' and ensure we're out there in force at the right times. Our targeted breath testing strategy has proven successful in recent years, with an increased 'hit rate' for drink drivers right across the ACT. The strategy aims

to cover all bases — targeting the known peak trouble times and places, while also ensuring a general high visibility strategy keeps drivers alert at all times.

"It sounds like a simple idea but it can make the difference — additional patrolling of the suburbs increases road user attention to their behaviours, and ultimately, that's what a lot of it boils down to — driver awareness.

"It's those few seconds when a driver looks at their radio, reaches for a mobile phone, fixes their hair in a mirror or just starts to turn their mind to other things that tragedy can strike. We, as police, have a responsibility for is getting out there and reminding drivers that they don't have that luxury — switching your attention to other things while you're



“The idea behind traffic secondments is to get the newly sworn officers out there and chatting to the public, getting to learn processes and procedures.”

on the road is simply not an option if we're to keep our roads safe,” he said.

As part of the high visibility approach in the ACT, it is now common practice to second new recruits to traffic operations for a two week period upon completion of recruit training. This allows new police to develop their skills in the practical application of police work, while also providing a surge capacity for Traffic Operations to enhance its enforcement strategies.

Constable Angela Smith, now working in General Duties at City Police Station, said her stint with the traffic team was an eye opener after completing her recruit training term.

Some members of the community even said thanks after being issued infringement notices.

“The idea behind the traffic secondment is to get the newly sworn officers out there and chatting to members of the public, getting to learn processes and procedures,” she said.

“Two weeks doesn't sound like long, but as new recruits, that two weeks is when you learn about the basics — no more scenarios or class room activities, this was real-life.

“We focused on random breath tests during the fortnight, which got us chatting to people, issuing infringement notices and, for some, it led to the beginning of a first brief of evidence. I found the community was generally quite happy and obliging when pulled over and asked to give a breath sample. Some even said thanks after being issued infringement notices.

The use of RAPID technology will allow police to target traffic offences as well as volume crime-related matters.



RAPID can be a useful aid to the ACT's Volume Crime Strategy which primarily targets repeat offenders and stolen motor vehicles, by offering the ability to identify suspect target vehicles which may contain property and or drugs as well as identifying possible offenders linked to vehicles.

While the use of radar while conducting RAPID scanning is not feasible in a practical sense, the use of laser speed detection by the stopping crews is possible.

When RAPID is operated by an experienced operator, police also have the ability to detect ancillary offences, such as failing to wear seat belts, using hand held mobile phones while driving and offences relating to vehicle roadworthiness.

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"Most importantly though, we certainly felt we'd made a dent in the number of unregistered and unlicensed vehicles on the road," she said.

"On top of that, by the end of two weeks, the whole recruit class was very excited about our career choice."

## Technology

After being the first Australian police jurisdiction to implement the number

plate recognition software RAPID (Recognition and Analysis of Plates Identified and Detected) in late 2003, ACT Policing has now developed a mobile version which Traffic Operations members take with them on a laptop during their shift. While it doesn't have a camera attached, it does provide the same information to allow access to registration and licensing details as well as details about vehicles and persons of interest.