


# Sobering thoughts

As the Federation holds a national conference on roads policing this month, Kevin Clinton, road safety advisor for The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA), set to speak at the event, argues for a need to prioritise the issue and for adequate enforcement to prevent crimes such as drink driving from claiming lives .

 The police have many priorities including violent crime, burglary and preventing terrorism - all of these are extremely important issues that affect public safety. However, far more people are killed on the road than by any other form of crime.

In 2004, 3,221 people were killed in road crashes in Britain, 31,130 were seriously injured and about 250,000 slightly injured. Almost 100 people are killed or seriously injured in road crashes every day. On average, four people are killed or seriously injured on the road every hour of every day.

Almost all road crashes are caused by, or involve, human error. The vast majority of deaths and injuries are due to careless or dangerous driving, including 1,000 deaths due to speeding, and close to 600 deaths due to drink driving.

It is incredible to think that this appalling toll of death and misery is actually a vast improvement. In the mid 1980s, road deaths were over 5,500 each year, and almost 75,000 people were seriously injured. But, despite massive increases in traffic, road casualties have fallen steadily, largely due to improved vehicle design, engineering measures, such as traffic calming, enforcement measures, such as the breathalyser and speed cameras and road user education, training and publicity.

However, we still kill nine people a day on the road. To



Credit: Karen Bristol

reduce this unnecessary waste, we need to influence the way drivers behave. The most effective means of doing this is by a co-ordinated strategy which includes:

- Education, including training and publicity, to provide appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes so people choose to use the roads in a safe and responsible manner
- Engineering, both road and vehicle, to physically affect the way road users behave, for example, speed reduction measures
- Enforcement to deter irresponsible, dangerous and unlawful behaviour, catch offenders and support and complement education and engineering measures.

Enforcement is a fundamental and irreplaceable part of this strategy. It plays a key role in saving lives and minimising injury on the road. It must be given its rightful priority by governments and the police services, and be adequately resourced. Road users must believe that there is a good chance that they will get caught if they behave illegally or dangerously. This requires a high-profile, highly visible, roads policing presence.

Recent years have seen some very welcome developments in the priority given to roads policing at ACPO and governmental level, including the *Modern Road Policing Manifesto*, the *Road Death Investigation Manual*, the road safety elements of the National Policing Plans and the *Roads Policing Strategy*.

These set a clear policy agenda.

But turning policy into practice is the key. Effective roads policing requires adequate police resources. The HMIC Thematic report, *Road Policing and Traffic*, published in 1998, identified considerable variations between forces in the numbers of officers assigned to road policing and in the tasks they undertake. Many others, including RoSPA, are concerned that resources for roads policing have been allowed to slip, and figures from the House of Commons Transport Committee indicate a substantial drop in numbers of traffic officers between 1997 and 2001.

The counter arguments have been that the apparent reduction is misleading because roads policing is not just conducted by

Credit: Karen Bristol

traffic officers, and that technology, such as safety cameras and Automatic Number Plate Recognition, (ANPR) is a very cost-effective way of enforcement. It is also argued that community support officers and Highways Agency traffic officers allow police officers to concentrate more on roads policing activities that require their expertise.

RoSPA strongly supports safety cameras and ANPR as they are certainly very effective enforcement tools that significantly reduce the number of people killed and injured on our roads.

And it may prove helpful to transfer some roads duties to properly trained and managed non-police personnel if this enables the police to increase the resources devoted to traffic enforcement and collision investigation.

However, if they simply replace roads police officers, road safety will be reduced, not improved. Even with these changes, there is no substitute for a strong, visible police presence on the road.

Drink driving is a good example. The number of people killed and injured in drink drive crashes fell dramatically during the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, but then levelled off and is now rising. In 2003, 580 people were killed in drink drive crashes, the highest number since 1996; and the provisional figure for 2004 of 590 deaths is even higher.

Enforcement levels are critical to detecting and deterring drink drivers. The number of breath tests carried out increased dramatically during the 1990s but has been falling since the turn of the century, and by 2003 the number of breath tests was lower than in 1993. Despite this, more drivers are failing the tests, suggesting that the police are better at spotting drivers who are likely to be over the limit, or that more people are drinking and driving, or both.

However, police forces vary widely in the number of tests they conduct, from just 390 breath tests per 100,000 population in some force areas to almost ten times that rate in other areas. This 'postcode' lack of consistency is worrying, especially when research carried out for the Home Office, *Drink-driving: prevalence and attitudes in England and Wales 2002*, found that half of drivers felt it was "unlikely" or "very unlikely" that they would get caught even if they drove over the limit once a week for a year.

The drink drive campaign needs to be re-invigorated. The use of evidential breath tests, allowing police to spend more time on the road, wider use of rehabilitation courses and re-tests and alcohol interlocks, if the trial proves successful, will certainly help. But RoSPA believes that a step-change in our approach to drink driving is needed.

### Legal limit

A considerable amount of nation-

al and international research has shown that most drivers are impaired at a blood alcohol level of 50mg. The latest estimates are that reducing the limit to 50mg would save 65 lives each year and prevent 230 serious injuries.

We believe a lower limit should be introduced as part of a wider package of drink drive measures, including those above, and be accompanied by wider police powers to breath test drivers anywhere and at anytime. If half of drivers think they can get away with driving while over the limit once a week for a year, we clearly need to increase the perception, and the reality, that the chances of getting caught are high.

Roads policing is a fundamental and irreplaceable activity, which plays a key role in saving lives and minimising injury on the road. In order to do this effectively, it must be given its rightful priority by the Government and the police service, and be adequately resourced.

The police service has many vital roles to play in our society. They must, therefore, allocate their limited resources to the best possible effect. The level of death and injury caused by poor, and often illegal, behaviour on the road far exceeds the number of people killed through any other form of crime.

Roads policing must not be allowed to fall down the agenda; it must remain a top priority.



An international review of road safety enforcement methods, *Traffic Law Enforcement: A Review of the literature*, published in 1994, reached several important conclusions:

- The success of enforcement depends on its ability to create a meaningful deterrent threat to road users. The primary focus should be on increasing surveillance levels to ensure that drivers think there is a high chance of being caught if they offend.
- Significantly increasing the actual level of enforcement activity is the most effective means of increasing the perceived risk of apprehension.
- Periodic, short-term intensive enforcement operations are a more cost effective option, however, the long term effect on road user behaviour may be lower.
- Selective enforcement strategies, designed to specifically target high risk road user behaviour and traffic accident locations, are another cost effective alternative.
- Automated enforcement devices provide the most cost effective means of significantly increasing apprehension risk and should be adopted as a matter of priority.
- Publicity to support enforcement operations should be adopted to increase enforcement effectiveness.
- It is essential that road users actually observe the publicised increase in the level of enforcement activity otherwise behavioural changes are usually only short-term.

● RoSPA is an independent charity which promotes safety in all areas of life – on the road, in the home, at work, in schools, at leisure and on or near water. Our aim is to help reduce accidental deaths and injury. Further information and free road safety resources are available at [www.rosipa.com/roadsafety](http://www.rosipa.com/roadsafety).