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SPEED LAW ENFORCEMENT IN METROPOLITAN AREAS

Maurice Floch

The author is Criminal Psychologist on the staff of the Detroit House of Correction, Plymouth, Michigan. During the last few years he has been carrying on research in connection with the personalities of traffic offenders. The first of his reports on these studies appeared in this Journal in his article "Attitude Toward the Grave Traffic Offense." His present article continues the important discussion of traffic enforcement and the individual offenders.—EDITOR.

Few people would disagree with the statement that speed could be held responsible for more traffic accidents than all other factors combined. The very existence of speed limits both in urban and rural areas attests to the recognition of this fact on the part of enforcement officials. It is also a distinct possibility that most traffic offenders, that is, people who violate traffic regulations, particularly speed laws, are of the common garden variety of humanity and are not deviated, abnormal characters. At least, there have not been any conclusive studies produced as yet to show that traffic offenders were different from other people in any particularly important characteristics.

Should research definitely indicate that the speed law violator is just an ordinary, average human being, this conclusion would not be very surprising because our culture has for some time now oversold the public on the virtues of speed. For many years cars have been marketed with a fan-fare, advertising and glorifying their swift qualities. Automobile engines, too, have been made progressively more powerful and fast. Speed races have been promoted to the most entertaining spectacles in America. It is no more than natural, therefore, that the average American, having acquired possession of a powerful and speedy piece of mechanism, will want to make full use of it and will push the throttle down all the way even though such speedy travel might entail considerable danger to others and self as well.

However, the enforcement of speed laws is no easy task in a metropolitan community, particularly, in the types that sprawl over huge areas, such as Los Angeles or Detroit. To be sure, none of the large communities possess a sufficiently numerous police force, particularly traffic police force, to adequately cover the major traffic arteries. The usual situation is something like this. There is relatively small number of traffic police which is thinly spread over the whole city with the result that no one artery is sufficiently supplied. The enforcement is rather sporadic and hit or miss. Very few of the large number of violators are apprehended or given tickets for infraction of speed laws. The great majority indefinitely continue their over the limit, careless driving habits. The only places where the traffic laws are obeyed with

any zeal at all are some thickly populated and heavily policed areas such as the downtown sections. In the more removed and outlying zones the speed limit signs have relatively little meaning to the average citizen. To illustrate, a 30 mile speed limit is regularly exceeded by at least 5 miles so that the average speed will be 35 rather than 30 in a 30 mile zone. Similarly, a 35 mile sign is exceeded by at least 5 and frequently 10 miles so that in a 35 mile zone the actual speed of the cars may reach 45 miles.

It is the conviction of the present writer that the high speed driving of the average citizen plus the relatively weak enforcement of speed laws bears a good share of the responsibility for the deplorable and tragic record of our country in traffic accidents which produced in 1949, 31,800 outright fatalities and 1,964,000 injuries. Yet, the same American public which does its utmost to reduce the death rate and suffering from infantile paralysis, rheumatic fever, and other ailments views without any excitement the alarming fatality and injury figures of automobile driving.

How could the situation be improved in metropolitan communities without the expenditure of additional huge sums of money usually not countenanced by the citizenry? One, is by more effective policing; second, by more effective traffic law education.

Let us analyze first the question of policing. It is a well known fact that the most successful control is established not by a show of actual force but rather by the creation of an *illusion of force*. For example, in no country is either the police or the army sufficiently strong and large actually to subdue the population, should all citizens decide on overthrowing the government. A controlling force is always very much smaller than actually necessary. Why? Because, the average citizen in any country reacts chiefly to an illusion of force. He believes that he would be quickly put down, should he rise to protest any particular action on the part of the government. He also believes that a sufficiently strong force exists to control everyone, should all citizens decide simultaneously to resist. He has been made to believe this by a clever manipulation of actual forces. The methods whereby these illusions of force are brought about constitute important chapters in military science and strategy.

In the enforcement of speed laws the illusion of force may be accomplished in the following manner. Instead of thinly spreading the usually small number of traffic enforcement officers over all the major traffic arteries of the city simultaneously, they might be employed *by saturating* these same traffic arteries with an overwhelming number of police at

irregularly spaced time periods. Thus, the drivers on these arteries would suddenly find themselves confronted with a sufficiently large number of enforcing officers to apprehend theoretically every violator of speed laws. To speak mathematically, instead of ticketing, say, two speed law violators out of ten, 8 speed violators would be ticketed out of every ten during such *saturation drives*. There would be additional results, namely, that the mere presence of a large number of enforcing officers on a traffic artery would immediately cause the drivers to drive within the speed limits for fear of getting arrested or ticketed. Again, the fact, that the saturation of traffic arteries with enforcement officers would not occur at regular but irregularly spaced intervals, would maintain an element of surprise in the minds of the drivers, never permitting anticipation of sudden spurts in the enforcement of speed laws.

If such enforcement saturation would be effected systematically throughout the metropolitan community, on all of the traffic arteries of significance, an illusion of force would eventually become established throughout the driving population. No violating driver would know when his turn would come in receiving one of the many traffic tickets handed out by the traffic police. Hence, he would have a compelling reason to desist from such behavior. Today, in view of the present manner of enforcement, he knows that his chances of becoming apprehended for speeding are relatively small. Therefore, he regularly drives by violating speed limits and contributes to the large number of traffic accidents and fatalities.

There is still another way in which enforcement could be improved upon. There are a relatively small number of chronic violators who consistently incur traffic tickets and, at times, become incarcerated for speedy or reckless driving. Most of these are rather lightly treated by traffic courts even though they are not infrequently deprived of their licenses. However, license suspension does not mean much because many of these characters will drive time and time again without their driver's licenses, and if they do become apprehended, they get away with a mere 15 or 30 days in jail. Two things could be done to improve this situation. One is to refer such individuals, who are chronic traffic violators, to psychiatric examinations which might bring about the institutionalization of the mentally ill and deviate drivers. Secondly, the individual who insists on driving even though his license has been revoked, should be incarcerated for relatively long periods of time, under progressively longer sentences depending on the number of these violations not so much as a matter of punishment but rather of quarantine. It is time that the community take a serious view of those who insist upon driving even though they have been branded as unsafe and

anti-social drivers. If such individuals were incarcerated for long periods of time, at least for so many months or even years, they would be prevented from endangering other people's lives with their driving.

The next question to consider is how to improve the driving situation by the education of drivers. The necessity for driver education has been recognized throughout the country. Every so often campaigns are waged in various metropolitan communities by means of posters or radio and movie programs to instill in the minds of the public the importance of safe driving. Many of these efforts are exceedingly useful and have certainly helped in cutting down some alarming fatality and accident figures. Unfortunately, in the majority of instances these campaigns restricted themselves to school safety education and to the establishment of such slogans as "Take it easy" or "Don't cut in," "Drunk drivers go to Jail," and so forth. Not much has been done in the direction of acquainting the public with the legal results of unsafe driving, namely, with the specific penalties which follow various types of traffic violations. The present author, explored this question at one time, being interested to learn how much previous acquaintance prisoners had with the penalties following from violations of the various laws. He found to his amazement that very few people had knowledge of the laws and learned of the nature of possible penalties only after they had become apprehended. There is a good probability the same condition holds true with reference to traffic laws. Few people know the exact legal consequences of speed law violations, what a first ticket, what a second ticket, would cost, and what would result from successive moving violations. A realistic approach to the problem would recognize this fact and would concentrate on permanent driver education by means of posters scattered on all significant traffic arteries, stating in unequivocal terms what penalties follow specific violations to engrave on the mind of every driver the actual results of anti-social traffic behavior.

Thus, saturation enforcement, as sketched before, plus driver education in the penalties following from speed law violations, would combine in creating the mentioned illusion of force on which all effective control depends.

It is high time the American public awakened to a danger much greater than that occasioned by any number of serious diseases or of crime waves which from time to time excite and alarm our population. Unless we do something about speed law enforcement we will find that our population will decrease much more as a result of the use of the automobile than because of any of the wars we have fought.