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# **A Survey of Operational Police Involved in the Delivery of Random Breath Testing (RBT) in Queensland, Australia**

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## **Abstract**

Over the last two decades, there has been a major reduction in the involvement of alcohol in road crashes in Australia. The evidence suggests that a key factor in this reduction has been the introduction and ongoing operation of Random Breath Testing (RBT). This paper reports on the findings of a survey of operational police involved in the delivery of RBT. The primary aim was to identify those factors that acted as either facilitators or barriers to the effective delivery of RBT at an operational level. With the assistance of the Queensland Police Service (QPS), a questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 950 operational police likely to be involved in the delivery of RBT, stratified by the QPS's geographic regions. A total of 421 questionnaires were returned representing a 44% response rate. The survey results confirmed that there is strong support for RBT among operational police in Queensland. While the participants indicated that they were adequately trained and supported to perform the task, a number of potential areas for improvement were identified. Central among these is the need to develop more formal rewards for conducting RBT and to provide more information to operational police about the success of the program.

## **Introduction**

Throughout Australia, random breath testing (RBT) has been the primary law enforcement tool for both detecting and deterring drink drivers for over 20 years. The legislation underpinning RBT allows the police to pull over and breath test a driver at any time, without having observed any aberrant behaviour. Since its inception in Victoria in 1976 and introduction in Queensland in 1988, the practice of RBT has continually been remodelled and intensified to reflect an ongoing commitment to reduce alcohol-related fatalities in Australia. Currently, the Queensland Police Service (QPS) commit considerable resources to RBT, in order to achieve a target of conducting the equivalent of one (preliminary) breath test for every licensed driver per year (QPS, 2006). For example, in 2005 the QPS allocated 229,509 officer hours to breath testing, which resulted in them conducting 2,968,092 breath tests at a ratio of 1:1.08 tests per licensed driver. This represents the highest rate of breath testing by any police jurisdiction in Australia (QPS, 2006).

RBT's success over the years has been evidenced by reductions in drink driving behaviour, reductions in alcohol-related crashes and fatal crashes and a corresponding community-wide increase in the disapproval of drink driving (see Harrison *et al*, 2003). However, although research has been able to demonstrate the relationship between RBT and reductions in alcohol-related crashes (Henstridge, Homel & Mackay, 1997; Watson *et al*, 1994), little is known about the organisational factors that assist or hinder the operation of RBT. As a result, the primary aim of this study was to explore the perceived barriers and facilitators to the effective operation of RBT in the QPS. It should also be noted, that the study formed part of a larger review of RBT in Queensland, components of which have been reported elsewhere (Hart, Watson & Tay, 2003; Watson & Freeman, 2006).

Semler's (1999) *Organisational Alignment Model* was utilised to guide the design of the study. This model proposes that the overall performance of an organisation is determined by the degree to which its goals, strategies, structures and culture are aligned. The key constructs within Semler's model are: the *Environment* in which the organisation operates; the organisation's *Vision, Values and Purpose*; and organisational characteristics including *Strategies, Culture, Rewards, Structure and Systems, Practices and Behaviour*. In order to utilise Semler's model, it was assumed that an effective RBT program would be one where there was strong alignment between the operational goals and practices of the program and what is considered best practice. Therefore, the specific issues/concepts that were used to adapt the model were drawn from the RBT best practice literature. A detailed description of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. However, key best practice features include the need for RBT operations to be unpredictable, unavoidable and ubiquitous through: the maintenance of sustained high levels of testing; ensuring that operations are highly visible, threatening and rigorous; ensuring that all drivers stopped are tested; giving priority to stationary operations; educating police about the benefits of deterrence; and reinforcing RBT with publicity (Harrison *et al*, 2003; Homel, 1990; Watson *et al*, 1994).

## **Method**

With the assistance of the QPS, a questionnaire was distributed to a random sample of 950 operational police likely to be involved in the delivery of RBT, stratified by the QPS's geographic regions. As noted above, the 39 item questionnaire was structured around the constructs within Semler's (1999) *Organisational Alignment Model*. The majority of items in the questionnaire were based on short statements with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly disagree, to 5 = Strongly agree) to indicate level of agreement with these statements.

A total of 421 questionnaires were returned representing a 44% response rate. The sample comprised 80% men and 20% women and ages ranged between 21 years and 55 years. The rank categories represented in the sample were: Probationary Constable (6%); Constable (36%); Senior Constable (33%); Sergeant (24%); and Senior Sergeant (1%). The mean number of years of service was 8.5 years and all regions were equally represented.

## **Results**

The key findings of the study are presented below in terms of the constructs within Semler's model. In some cases, the constructs are combined to summarise the information. For each of the constructs, the relevant questionnaire items are listed along with the percentage of participants agreeing with each statement.

### *Environment and Vision, Values and Purpose*

As shown in Table 1, the results for the Environment construct indicate that the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the QPS played a major role in setting the number of RBT tests conducted each year (85%). In addition, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that the QPS played a major role in determining the way in which RBT is conducted. These results confirm that the QPS is perceived by respondents to exert the major influence on the overall approach to RBT, suggesting a strong alignment between the goals of the organisation and its operations. Similarly, in the case of the Vision, Values and Purpose construct, there was strong agreement among the respondents with the various goals of the QPS's RBT program, including both its deterrence and apprehension functions.

**Table 1: Items relating to the Environment and Vision, Values and Purpose constructs**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The following groups currently play a major role in setting the number of RBT tests conducted each year:					
- the community	3	19	24	36	18
- the QPS	44	42	7	7	1
- Queensland Transport	28	35	24	10	3
- other government agencies	13	23	40	18	7
- politicians	34	31	20	11	4
The overall goals of the QPS's RBT program are to:					
- promote safe and responsible road use in QLD	48	43	5	3	1
- increase public safety	47	43	6	3	1
- reduce drink driving crashes	47	41	8	3	1
- catch drink driving offenders	37	37	8	12	6
- discourage drink driving behaviour	56	38	3	3	1

*Strategy*

The results for the Strategy construct were more mixed (see Table 2). For example, 97% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that one of the QPS RBT strategies was to conduct operations in a highly visible manner, 67% agreed/strongly agreed that these operations were done in an unpredictable manner, and 63% agreed/strongly agreed that there was a clear rationale underpinning the number of tests conducted each year. However, respondents were more divided about the extent to which operations were unavoidable, are undertaken in stationary mode and whether the QPS had a clear rationale for where and how testing was performed. Finally, even less consensus was evident in relation to the statement that the strategy of one test per licensed driver was realistic, where 37% disagreed/strongly disagreed and 24% were neutral or unsure. Together, the results for this construct suggest general agreement with the overall RBT strategy, but reveal concerns about the 1:1 testing objective.

**Table 2: Items relating to the Strategy construct**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The main strategies QPS uses to achieve these goals are:					
- conduct RBT in a highly visible manner	50	43	5	1.5	.5
- ensure that the majority of RBT operations are unpredictable in their timing and location	27	40	14	16	3
- ensure that RBT is unavoidable	19	31	24	22	4
- ensure that the majority of tests are done by stationary operations	14	31	30	22	3
The QPS has a clear rationale underpinning:					
- the number of RBT tests conducted each year	26	37	21	12	5
- where and how RBT is conducted	15	38	23	19	5
The current objective of one breath test per licensed driver per year is realistic	10	30	24	26	11

### Structure and Systems

With regard to Structures and Systems, it appears that the QPS has been relatively successful in communicating to members the overall objectives of RBT and the policies and procedures relating to the program (see Table 3). In addition, there was strong agreement relating to there being systems and processes in place to reliably record the number of RBT tests performed and, to a lesser extent, agreement concerning the monitoring of mobile/stationary tests and the deployment of RBT operations. However, the results suggest that there is some lack of alignment regarding the provision of information about the rationale for the number of tests expected, feedback to operational police about the success of RBT, and methods for measuring its impact in reducing drink driving crashes. The perceived lack of feedback may have contributed to the fact that 47% of participants were unsure as to whether RBT had proven effective in reducing the road toll. This suggests that the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of RBT has been successfully communicated to operational police but not necessarily the ‘why’.

**Table 3: Items relating to the Structure and systems construct**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The QPS communicates the following to operational members:					
- the objectives of RBT	8	48	22	20	2
- policies & procedures related to the operation of RBT	16	51	18	12	3
- the rationale for determining the number of tests expected	6	21	23	37	13
The QPS has systems and processes in place to:					
- reliably record the number of tests conducted	21	56	11	9	3
- measure the impact of RBT in reducing drink driving crashes	6	25	43	23	4
- monitor the ratio of stationary to mobile RBT tests	10	42	32	15	2
- provide feedback on the success of RBT to operational members	4	18	29	37	11
- guide the deployment of RBT operations	6	36	35	18	5
RBT has proven effective in reducing the road toll	7	32	47	11	3

### Rewards and Culture

The responses in this area suggested that there is a lack of formal rewards in place to encourage RBT operations (see Table 4). A large proportion of respondents (84%) did not agree that RBT represented a good way of securing extra money via shift penalties, while nearly half (45%) indicated that RBT participation was not formally acknowledged in performance appraisals (although 33% were neutral/unsure). In contrast, the results relating to informal rewards were more encouraging. For example, 59% agreed/strongly agreed that supervisors would be likely to praise them for helping to reach testing quotas, while 47% agreed/strongly agreed that they would be praised for catching drink drivers. Interestingly, the respondents were more likely to agree that they would be praised by their peers for catching drink drivers than reaching testing targets. This suggests a stronger culture of support among operational police for the apprehension functions of RBT as opposed to deterrence. This was confirmed by other findings of the study suggesting that operational police preferred to conduct mobile rather than stationary RBT, since this was seen as less of a ‘menial task’.

**Table 4: Items relating to the Rewards construct**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Conducting RBT provides opportunities to make extra money (eg. shift penalties)	1	5	11	36	48
In my area, performance appraisals (PPAs) take into account the amount of RBT you conduct	4	17	33	28	17
When conducting RBT, it is likely that other members will:					
- praise you for catching drink drivers	17	36	17	23	7
- praise you for helping to reach testing quotas	9	21	22	35	14
When conducting RBT, it is likely that your supervisors will:					
- praise you for catching drink drivers	11	36	20	24	9
- praise you for helping to reach testing quotas	24	35	17	17	7

### *Practices and Behaviour*

Other research has identified concerns among some police that the quality of RBT operations can be influenced by the pressures to meet targets, including an over-reliance on testing in high volume traffic times (Hart, Watson & Tay, 2003). The perceptions of the respondents appeared divided on this issue, with slightly more officers agreeing than disagreeing that this practice occurs in their area (with almost one quarter being neutral/unsure). Similarly, although the majority of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed that targets for their areas were either met or exceeded on most occasions and that RBT testing levels were accurately recorded, both these items had relatively high neutral/unsure responses. This suggests that many respondents were unaware of the practices occurring in their area. Consistent with best practice guidelines, 83% of the respondents strongly agreed/agreed that they conducted RBT in a highly visible manner. However, 58% agreed/strongly agreed that they tended to select locations where they were likely to detect drink drivers, rather than try to vary the locations of operations. Together, these responses highlight the inevitable tension between deterrence and apprehension often reported in the RBT literature. It is also important to note that only 27% agreed/strongly agreed that they preferred to conduct RBT than other traffic duties.

**Table 5: Items relating to the Practices and Behaviour constructs**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
In order to meet targets in our area, RBT operations are often set up during high volume traffic times	11	31	24	28	6
The amount of RBT conducted in my area meets or exceeds targets on most occasions	10	41	37	10	3
The number of RBT tests conducted in my area is accurately recorded	13	46	25	12	4
I/we (partner/team) tend to choose RBT locations where it is more likely that drink drivers will be caught, rather than try to vary the locations where we conduct tests	18	40	17	23	2
I/we (partner/team) conduct RBT in a highly visible way	23	60	11	6	0
I prefer to conduct RBT duties than other traffic duties	7	20	34	29	10

## Performance

Over 90% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they were adequately trained to conduct RBT and were aware of the policies and procedures involved (see Table 5). Similarly, 80% were in support of the overall goals of RBT, although 63% said that they found it difficult to carry out the required amount of RBT due to other policing duties. Just over half (52%) agreed/strongly agreed that they supported the way the current RBT program is conducted, while 58% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they would volunteer for RBT duties if the need arose.

**Table 5: Items relating to the Performance construct**

Questionnaire item	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral or unsure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I find it difficult to conduct the amount of RBT required due to other policing duties	31	32	19	16	2
I feel that I am adequately trained to conduct RBT	49	46	3	1.5	.5
I am aware of the policies and procedures related to RBT	39	55	4	1.5	.5
I support the overall goals of RBT as I understand them	28	52	10	9	2
I support the way that the RBT program is currently conducted	13	39	20	20	8
I would volunteer for RBT duties if the need arose	18	40	15	19	8

## Discussion

Overall, the results indicate that there is strong support for RBT among operational police in Queensland. There were many areas where the perceptions of the respondents appeared to be well aligned with the best practice features of RBT including general agreement that:

- the QPS plays the main role in determining how RBT is conducted;
- the goals of the RBT program are appropriate, including both its deterrence and apprehension functions;
- RBT is conducted in a highly visible and unpredictable manner;
- there is good communication of the overall objectives of RBT and the policies and procedures relating to the program;
- there are systems and processes in place to reliably record the number of RBT tests performed and whether they are conducted by stationary or mobile units; and
- officers are adequately trained to conduct RBT and are aware of the relevant policies and procedures.

However, a number of areas of misalignment were apparent that may be acting as a barrier to the effective delivery of RBT. The first of these concerns the need for more feedback to be provided to operational police regarding the rationale underpinning the 1:1 testing objective and the success of RBT as a road safety initiative. In this regard, it is noteworthy that 47% of the respondents were unsure as to whether RBT had proven effective in reducing the road toll. The second area of concern is the need to implement more formal rewards for conducting RBT operations, particularly in best practice mode. Finally, there is a need for ongoing education of police into the nature and role of deterrence in road safety, in general, and RBT operations, in particular. This is required to address the inevitable cultural pressures within

police services to focus on the apprehension of offenders (Homel, 1988; Watson, Fraine & Mitchell, 1994). In summary, it is important that RBT is perceived by operational police to be a valuable aspect of policing, which serves a vital road safety function, rather than be seen as a relatively unproductive, menial task.

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