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Hooning offenders and offences: Who and what are we dealing with?

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ABSTRACT

Street racing and associated (hooning) behaviours have attracted growing community concern in Australia, and internationally, over recent years. Governments have responded by introducing legislation designed to address the behaviours, and allocating significant police resources to managing the problem. All Australian states and territories, and New Zealand, have now implemented “anti-hooning” countermeasures, typically involving impounding the vehicles of offenders for increasing periods of time for subsequent offences, ultimately leading to forfeiture of the vehicle. For example, among other sanctions imposed, the vehicles of drivers charged with an offence under this legislation in Queensland are impounded for 48 hours for a first offence, three months after a second offence within three years, and may be forfeited to the state after a third offence within three years. Since the introduction of the legislation in November 2002 and until the end of 2006, 3,221 vehicles have been impounded for a period of 48 hours. A small number of vehicles have been impounded for a second (72, 2.2%), third (4, 0.1%) or fourth (1, 0.03%) hooning offence. Although most hooning offenders are young males, a group known to be over-represented in crash statistics, hooning offenders have not been profiled in a systematic way, and the possibility that sub-groups of drivers exist has not been explored. This paper aims to address these research needs to inform future research and management of “anti-hooning” legislation.

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INTRODUCTION

Illegal street racing has received significant negative media attention in recent years, reflecting general public concern (Glensor & Peak, 2005; Knight, Cook, & Olson, 2004; Peak & Glensor, 2004; Vaaranen, 2004; Vaaranen & Wieloch, 2002; Warn, Tranter, & Kingham, 2004). For example, in an investigation undertaken by the Canadian Road Safety Monitor, it was found that the majority of respondents were concerned or extremely concerned about illegal street racing, and considered it a serious problem (Beirness, Mayhew, Simpson, & Desmond, 2004; Singhal, Simpson, Vanlaar, & Mayhew, 2006). From both a popular culture and legislative point of view, it is important to note that “hooning” in the Australian context encompasses a broader group of behaviours than illegal street racing alone.

Defining “hooning”

There is no clear definition of hooning behaviours in the road safety literature. This may be because terms such as “hoon” and “hooning” are Australian colloquialisms, and prior to the implementation of “anti-hooning” legislation, hooning was typically dealt with as a public amenity issue.

Over recent years, the term “hooning” has been used to refer to antisocial driving behaviours such as illegal street racing, “burn outs”¹, “donuts”², “drifting”³, unnecessary speed or acceleration, speed trials⁴ and even “cruising”⁵ (Knight et al., 2004; Peak & Glensor, 2004; Warn et al., 2004). Illegal street racing may be highly organised or spontaneous in nature. Highly organised races are typically staged at night in industrial areas (Warn et al., 2004), with start and finish lines marked a quarter of a mile apart (the traditional distance for drag races) (Leigh, 1996). Some groups use walkie-talkies and even police tape

¹ A **burn out** is when the rear tyres of a vehicle are spun at high revolutions per minute until they heat and smoke. More smoke is generated if the road surface has oil or petrol spills.

² A **donut** is when the driver turns the front tyres until the steering is fully locked during a burn out, so that the car rotates and a circular (donut) pattern of tread marks remains on the road surface.

³ **Drifting** is when a vehicle slides sideways through a turn taken at high speed.

⁴ **Speed trials** are when the acceleration and top-speed capability of a vehicle and / or the skill of its driver are tested, usually on a straight stretch of road of a set distance. Speed trials also include attempts to establish or break records.

⁵ **Cruising** refers to non-purposeful repetitive driving, where groups of vehicles slowly drive around an area to exhibit their vehicles.

and false signs to block the traffic for the duration of the race (Vaaranen & Wieloch, 2002). Others may use rolling road blocks⁶ to stage a race in the middle of a highway or other large multi-laned road. Spontaneous illegal street racing refers to impromptu, one-time races between persons who do not know one another (Peak & Glensor, 2004). For example, drivers stopped at traffic signals on a straight stretch of a double-laned road may race, with the traffic signals providing a starting signal (Warn et al., 2004).

The label of “hoon” is sometimes applied to car enthusiasts, drivers of modified vehicles, or to young drivers in general. The Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (CARRS-Q) recently completed a qualitative exploratory study to examine the experiences and thoughts of local car enthusiasts who are typically associated with street racing, hooning or cruising activities (Armstrong & Steinhardt, 2005). Participants in this research stated that those involved in the car enthusiast scene are not a homogeneous group, as there are a number of sub-groups, of which only some are truly dangerous. They argued that young car enthusiasts who drive the most noticeable or “showy” vehicles are often misclassified as hoons by police and the general public, when the reality is that drivers who engage in hooning behaviours can be anyone in any vehicle (Armstrong & Steinhardt, 2005). Thus given the widespread use of the terms “hoon” and “hooning”, and the potential for misclassification of involved drivers, it is important that researchers clearly define the behaviours under investigation.

In lieu of a commonly accepted definition in the road safety literature, an alternative method of defining hooning behaviours is to adopt a legislative definition. All Australian states and territories, and New Zealand, have now implemented “anti-hooning” countermeasures, typically involving impounding the vehicles of offenders for increasing periods of time for subsequent offences, ultimately leading to forfeiture of the vehicle. For example, in response to a growing number of community complaints regarding street racing, “burn outs”

⁶ **Rolling road blocks** refer to the practice of a large number of vehicles travelling as a convoy across all lanes of a road, slowing or blocking the progress of other vehicles until a clear “race-track” is created for some distance ahead.

and other “hooning” behaviours, and the potential for serious injury, Queensland’s *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act* was amended to give police the power to impound the vehicles of drivers committing prescribed hooning offences. These include: dangerous operation of a motor vehicle; careless driving of a motor vehicle; racing and speed trials on roads; and wilfully starting a vehicle, or driving a vehicle, in a way that makes unnecessary noise or smoke. Among other sanctions imposed (including fines, demerit points, and licence disqualification), the vehicles of drivers charged with an offence under Queensland’s “anti-hooning” legislation are impounded for 48 hours for a first offence, three months after a second offence within three years, and it is forfeited to the state after a third offence within three years. Unless otherwise stated, the term “hooning” in this paper will refer to this group of behaviours.

Who is involved in the street racing or “hooning” scene?

The available evidence suggests that it is predominantly young (age 16 to 25) males involved in the illegal street racing scene (Leigh, 1996; Peak & Glensor, 2004; Vaaranen & Wieloch, 2002; Warn et al., 2004), however the number of females attending events is increasing (Armstrong & Steinhardt, 2005). It appears that these are transitory activities, as most people do not continue to participate for more than two or three years (Leigh, 1996). Leigh (1996) reports that drivers in the Sydney street racing scene are predominantly Anglo-Saxon, and most are employed on a full-time basis as mechanics or in other trades, while others are involved in full-time education at high school or TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Colleges (Leigh, 1996). This group shows higher participation in employment and education than their peers, and it is suggested that this may be because street racing is an expensive enterprise. Some respondents had spent \$10,000 to \$25,000 on their vehicles, and several thousand dollars in fines for traffic offences and vehicle defect notices (Leigh, 1996). This is in contrast to the Helsinki street racing scene, where “cruising club” boys were typically from working class families, had rarely completed secondary school, and took low-paying factory and construction jobs to finance their interest in cars (Vaaranen, 2004).

Drivers involved in hooning have been described in the Australian media as young males who drive high performance or “souped-up” cars, rev big engines, play loud music, and travel with groups of “testosterone-addled chums” (e.g., Altman, 2006; Johnson, 2007; Penberthy, 2004; Russell & Cooke, 2006).

Aim

Although some research has profiled illegal street racers, hooning in an Australian context encompasses a broader group of behaviours than street racing alone. Thus there is a need to profile hooning offenders and offences in a systematic way. The aim of this paper is to profile a sample of Queensland hooning offenders and offences in order to describe the nature of the problem, and inform future research and policy with an empirical evidence base.

METHOD

Sample

Since the implementation of Queensland’s “anti-hooning” legislation on November 4, 2002 (and until the end of December, 2006), 3,221 vehicles have been impounded (L.-M. Folkman, personal communication, February 6, 2007). However, the drivers of these vehicles are difficult to identify in official datasets. While a number of offence codes can be used for the prescribed behaviours identified as hooning offences, these offences are not unique to the hooning legislation. For example, dangerous operation of a motor vehicle does not always indicate that the offender committed a hooning offence, and can be applied in other instances, such as after a road traffic crash, or in conjunction with a drink driving offence. This means that identifying hooning offenders in official datasets is not as simple as searching for a particular offence code.

To allow police officers to quickly identify whether a hooning offence was the first, second or third for a particular driver, from July 1, 2005 “hooning identifiers” were added to hooning offences when they were entered into the CRISP (Crime Reporting Information System for Police) database. As a consequence, for this research it was only possible to identify hooning offenders with these identifiers (i.e., all offenders from July 1, 2005 until the extraction date of October 1, 2006). This resulted in a sample of 967 hooning offenders

who were involved in 983 hooning offences. Although this sample is one third that of the total population, as all offenders from July 1, 2005 are included in the sample, there is no reason to expect any systematic sampling bias is present.

Data

After obtaining ethical approval from the Queensland University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee, an application to conduct external research with the Queensland Police Service (QPS) was submitted and approved. QPS provided a de-identified data file for the sample of hooning offences described above. A unique code was created by QPS for each individual in the file to allow the researchers to identify individuals with more than one offence during the 15-month period.

The variables relating to hooning offenders analysed for the purposes of this paper included: offender gender; offender age; racial appearance [as judged by attending police officer]; and occupation [occupation was later recoded by the researchers according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (2nd edition) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997)]. Analysed fields relating to the offence included: description; day; offence scene [e.g., street, shopping area]; and modus operandi⁷. Analysed fields relating to the vehicle included: type; make; year of manufacture; and registration status [e.g., registered to driver; stolen].

RESULTS

Hooning offenders

Table 1 shows that, consistent with previous illegal street racing research, the sample of hooning offenders primarily consisted of young (aged under 25 years; 76.9%), Caucasian (90.7%), males (97.3%). In terms of occupation (where known), the most common major codes among hooning offenders were tradespersons and related workers, not working, and labourers and related workers. These three groups accounted for more than three quarters of hooning offenders for whom occupation was known.

⁷ The modus operandi field outlines the reporting police officer's description of the offence.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of hooning offenders (N = 967)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage⁸
Gender		
Male	941	97.3
Female	26	2.7
Age		
13 – 16 years	17	1.8
17 – 20 years	491	50.8
21 – 24 years	236	24.4
25 – 29 years	121	12.5
30 – 39 years	74	7.7
40 – 49 years	22	2.3
50 – 59 years	3	0.3
60 – 69 years	2	0.2
70 – 79 years	1	0.1
Racial Appearance		
Caucasian	873	90.7
European	27	2.8
Aboriginal	21	2.2
Pacific Islander	18	1.9
South East Asian	13	1.3
Oriental Asian	4	0.4
Indian	3	0.3
Middle Eastern	3	0.3
Other	1	0.1
Unknown	4	
Occupation – Major Code⁹		
Tradespersons and related workers	195	32.7
Not working	161	27.0
Labourers and related workers	93	15.6
Intermediate production and transport workers	66	11.1
Elementary clerical, sales and service workers	27	4.5
Intermediate clerical, sales and service workers	20	3.4
Associate professionals	14	2.3
Professionals	11	1.8
Self-employed	7	1.2
Managers and administrators	1	0.2
Advanced clerical and service workers	1	0.2
Unknown	371	

⁸ Percentages were calculated using the total number of cases where the characteristic was known as the denominator.

⁹ Two additional codes were created by the researchers: “Not working” (unemployed, student, pension, and retired); and “Self-employed” (self-employed, owner/operator, business owner).

Tradespersons and related workers included occupations such as automotive tradespersons ($n = 59$); structural construction tradespersons ($n = 32$), mechanical engineering tradespersons ($n = 20$) and fabrication engineering tradespersons ($n = 19$). Not working was created by the researchers and included categories such as unemployed ($n = 113$) and students ($n = 42$). Labourers and related workers included occupations such as process workers ($n = 15$), mining and construction labourers ($n = 11$), and cleaners ($n = 9$).

Hooning offences

Table 2 shows that most hooning offences involved causing unnecessary noise or smoke (e.g., burn outs, donuts, fish tails; 66.9%), while engaging in an illegal street race or conducting a speed trial accounted for one fifth of all offences (19.4%). Hooning offences primarily occurred between Thursday and Sunday (although this may reflect enforcement; 76.9%), and on public streets (95.4%).

Table 2. Characteristics of hooning offences (N = 983)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage
Offence Description¹⁰		
Dangerous operation of a motor vehicle	167	17.0
Careless driving of a motor vehicle	138	14.0
Racing and speed trials on roads	191	19.4
Wilfully starting or driving a vehicle in a way that causes unnecessary noise or smoke	658	66.9
Day of Week		
Monday	69	7.0
Tuesday	72	7.3
Wednesday	86	8.7
Thursday	169	17.2
Friday	202	20.5
Saturday	207	21.1
Sunday	178	18.1
Offence Scene		
Street	938	95.4
Shopping area	18	1.8
Recreational area	6	0.6
Other	21	2.1

¹⁰ Percentages for offence descriptions sum to more than 100% as more than one offence code may be applied to an incident.

As can be seen in Table 3, more than one third of vehicles involved in hooning offences were not registered to the offender (35.5%).

Table 3. Characteristics of vehicles used in hooning offences (N = 983)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage¹¹
Registration Status		
Registered to offender	604	64.5
Not registered to offender	256	27.3
Unregistered	31	3.3
False registration plates	19	2.0
Commercial	15	1.6
Stolen	12	1.3
Unknown	46	
Vehicle Type		
Car / station wagon	765	80.5
Utility / panel van	145	15.3
Motorcycle	26	2.7
4WD	13	1.4
Rigid truck	1	0.1
Unknown	33	
Vehicle Make		
Holden	449	47.4
Ford	156	16.5
Nissan	122	12.9
Toyota	84	8.9
Mitsubishi	29	3.1
Mazda	22	2.3
Honda	19	2.0
Subaru	17	1.8
Hyundai	12	1.3
Other	37	3.9
Unknown	36	
Vehicle Year of Manufacture		
2002 – 2006	112	12.3
1997 – 2001	166	18.2
1992 – 1996	252	27.6
1987 – 1991	210	23.0
1982 – 1986	98	10.7
1981 and earlier	76	8.3
Unknown	69	

¹¹ Percentages were calculated using the total number of cases where the characteristic was known as the denominator.

Almost two thirds of vehicles involved in hooning offences were Holdens or Fords (63.9%). Although these are the most common two makes of vehicles on Australian roads according to the Motor Vehicle Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004), Holdens are over-represented in hooning offences (47.4% vs. 19.1%). Similarly, Nissans are driven in 12.9 percent of hooning offences, but make up only 6.9 percent of registered vehicles in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Given the perception that hooning involves high-powered or “souped-up” vehicles, and vehicle power restrictions imposed under Graduated Driver Licensing programs in many Australian jurisdictions, analysis of the power specifications or engine capacity of these vehicles was of interest. However, this information was not available for all offences.

Approximately half of the vehicles involved in hooning offences were 10 to 20 years old (50.5%). In both Queensland and Australia, the average age of registered passenger vehicles is 10.0 years, while for all registered vehicles the average age is 10.3 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004).

“Typical” versus “atypical” offender comparisons

Although the sample of female hooning offenders was small ($n = 26$), any differences between these drivers and the more “typical” male hooning offender were of interest to the researchers. In addition to significant gender differences in occupation ($\chi^2 = 40.81, p < .001$), the vehicles driven by females during the hooning offence differed to those driven by males ($\chi^2 = 11.29, p = .02$), as most female offenders (88.0%) were driving a car / station wagon and were less likely than their males counterparts to be driving other vehicle types. An interesting finding was that there were also significant gender differences in registration status ($\chi^2 = 23.14, p = .001$), as females were less likely than males to be driving a vehicle registered to them (23.1% vs. 62.8%).

Similarly, the characteristics of “young” hooning offenders (under 25, $n = 744$) and offences were compared to those of drivers aged 25 and over ($n = 223$). In addition to significant age differences in occupation ($\chi^2 = 39.39, p < .001$), young drivers were more likely than drivers aged 25 and over to have driving without due care or attention offences ($\chi^2 = 5.58, p = .02$). The vehicles driven

by young drivers during the hooning offence differed to those driven by drivers aged 25 and over ($\chi^2 = 23.18, p < .001$), as drivers aged 25 and over were more likely to be riding a motorcycle than young drivers (7.0% vs. 1.5%). Drivers aged 25 and over were significantly more likely than young drivers to be driving a new vehicle (manufactured in previous 5 years; $\chi^2 = 25.19, p < .001$; 18.6% vs. 10.4%).

The characteristics of offenders who wilfully caused unnecessary noise or smoke ($n = 634$) were compared to those who engaged in illegal street racing or speed trials on roads ($n = 176$)¹². Drivers who engaged in illegal street racing or speed trials were less likely to be Caucasian than those who wilfully caused unnecessary noise or smoke ($\chi^2 = 39.54, p < .001$, 84.6% vs. 94.2%). In terms of the vehicle driven during the offence, there were significant differences between offences ($\chi^2 = 131.57, p < .001$), as the proportions of Holdens (35.5% vs. 53.2%) and Fords (11.0% vs. 17.9%) were lower for racing offences, where drivers were more likely than those who created unnecessary noise or smoke to be driving Nissans (19.2% vs. 11.5%), Subarus (5.8% vs. 0.3%) and Hondas (5.8% vs. 0.5%). Vehicles used in illegal street races and speed trials were manufactured more recently than those used to wilfully cause unnecessary noise or smoke, $t(300) = -4.62, p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this paper was to profile hooning offenders and offences in order to describe the nature of the hooning problem in Queensland. Analysis of a sample of 967 hooning offenders revealed that, consistent with previous illegal street racing research, these drivers tend to be young, Caucasian males. This may suggest that hooning could be viewed as part of the mainstream young driver problem (Leal, Watson, Armstrong, & King, 2007). However, the finding that almost one quarter of hooning offenders are aged over 25 is in contrast to the popular belief that *all* hooning offenders are young drivers. While there were few differences between older and younger hooning offenders in the characteristics analysed for this research, the significant proportion of drivers

¹² Drivers who had both offences were excluded from the analysis.

aged 25 and over highlights the importance of exploring the possibility that hooning offenders are not a homogeneous group.

In contrast to the types of vehicles in movies such as *The Fast and the Furious* series, hooning offences need not occur in modified street machines, but occur in common vehicles such as Holden Commodores and Ford Falcons. However, the proportion of vehicles from the Nissan Sylvia and Skyline range are more consistent with the stereotypical “hoon” car, and were more common for racing and speed trial offences than those involving behaviours such as burn outs.

The finding that approximately one fifth of hooning offences involved illegal street racing or speed trials further illustrates the difference between hooning in an Australian context and the available illegal street racing literature. The differences between offenders and offences involving illegal street racing or speed trials and those involving wilfully causing unnecessary noise or smoke further illustrate the importance of exploring sub-groups of hooning offenders and offences. There are significant differences between the natures of these behaviours, and there are therefore likely to be differences in the associated road safety implications.

For example, it may be argued that only illegal street racing or speed trial offences that pose a road safety risk, due to the speeds attained by involved vehicles, while hooning offences involving unnecessary noise or smoke are better considered a public amenity issue. However, concurrent hooning offences (i.e., dangerous operation of a motor vehicle) are common. Further, there are considerable potential risks to the hooning driver, passengers, bystanders, and property depending on the context or location of unnecessary noise or smoke offences, as these offences involve a vehicle that has lost traction with the road surface and is essentially out of the driver’s control.

Implications and future directions

The finding that vehicles involved in hooning offences are 10 to 20 years old, which is older than the average car on the road, may have implications for the deterrent effect of vehicle sanctions, as these vehicles may be low in financial

value. The finding that more than one third of vehicles used in hooning offences are not registered to the offender also has implications for the deterrent effect of vehicle sanctions, as these may not be applied to these drivers. It is possible that drivers purposely have their vehicles registered in another person's name to avoid such sanctions.

These issues may be more relevant to some sub-groups of hooning offenders than others. For example, the small number of females in this sample were less likely to be detected hooning in a vehicle registered in their name, which may suggest that the threat of vehicle impoundment would not be as salient for females as for males. Young drivers tended to be in older vehicles, which are presumably lower in value than newer vehicles driven by older drivers. This may impact on the deterrent effect of the threat of vehicle impoundment or forfeiture. Similarly, the differences in the makes and manufacturing year of vehicles used in illegal street racing or speed trial offences compared to those used in unnecessary noise or smoke offences may result in differences in the perceptions of the severity of sanctions.

In terms of future research directions, there is a need to further explore the road safety implications of hooning behaviours through analysis of traffic and crash histories of hooning offenders, and comparisons between the crash involvement of hooning offenders and other known high-risk groups, including drink drivers, unlicensed drivers and young drivers generally. It may be useful and more meaningful from a road safety perspective to examine the risks associated with the different types of hooning offences separately. Finally, the ongoing enhancement of crash and hooning offence data collection practices will allow further research into the nature of the hooning problem, and facilitate comprehensive evaluations of current approaches to dealing with the problem.

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