

SME RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Review – Constable Scarecrow: Reducing Speeding Via Inanimate Police Presence

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Can an inanimate police officer reduce speeding?

Traffic collisions are a leading cause of death worldwide. Speed has consistently been found to contribute to such collisions. Reducing speed has thus become a priority for police and government groups around the world. Regulating speed can be resource intensive, thereby leading some police agencies to develop innovative approaches to try and slow motorists down. One such approach involves the use of inanimate police presence.

About the Constable Scarecrow evaluation

In order to test the effects of inanimate police presence on speeding, we strategically deployed a life-size metal cut-out of a police officer (herein after referred to as “Constable Scarecrow”) alongside several roadways in two different cities policed by the Coquitlam Detachment of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The cut-out was dressed in traffic enforcement apparel, including a forage cap, high-visibility vest and navy blue pants, and held a radar device in the operational position. Located behind the cut-out was a recording device that tracked each passing vehicle’s speed. As part of our analyses, we compared the proportion of speeding vehicles when Constable Scarecrow was present versus absent.

What does the evidence say?

The results of our evaluation revealed that fewer vehicles exceeded the speed limit in the presence of *Constable Scarecrow* when it was deployed along arterial routes: roads that connect residential streets to thoroughfares and local highways. The results also revealed that this reduction effect was curvilinear, such that the proportion of speeding vehicles exhibited a strong and immediate decline during the first few days of *Constable Scarecrow*’s deployment which then tapered off over time. We did not find any significant effects for *Constable Scarecrow* along residential routes.

Additional factors

It is possible that motorists may habituate to the presence of *Constable Scarecrow* and its inanimate nature each time that it is passed. Such habituation may help to explain why it did not exhibit significant effects along the residential routes and why its effect was curvilinear along the arterial routes. It is also possible that *Constable Scarecrow* may have impacted other motorist behaviours (in addition to speed). However, we were only able to examine speeding as part of the current evaluation.

Implications for practice

Police agencies may be able to maximize their perceived presence via the use of similar cut-outs. When appropriately deployed, such cut-outs may be able to reduce speeding along arterial roadways. Police leaders must pay particular attention to the context in which such cut-outs are deployed as well as monitor for any potential negative consequences.

Key references

Simpson, R., McCutcheon, M., & Lal, D. (2020). Reducing speeding via inanimate police presence: An evaluation of a police-directed field study regarding motorist behavior. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 19(3), 997-1018. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12513>