

Youth and Street Racing
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Current Issues in Criminal Justice, Vol 7, No 3, March 1995

Abstract

In terms of its perceived threat to society, street racing seems to have fallen somewhere between regular traffic offences and car theft. Yet it has little in common with either.

So far as I am aware, street racing has not been analysed by previous writers. Thus, not surprisingly, most theories have little to offer such an analysis.

The key argument made in this article is that the norms of street racers are those of the dominant culture. A desire to race stems from the symbolic power of masculinity, cars and motor sport. When this desire is blocked by an absence of legal racing venues, young men instead turn to racing on the street.

Introduction

In terms of its perceived threat to society, street racing seems to have fallen somewhere between regular traffic offences and car theft. Yet it has little in common with either.

Conducting illegal races is a phenomenon as old as the car itself. Yet it is also poorly understood by the general public, the media and even by some criminologists. Its highly organised nature, and the mystique which surrounds the night races have led many to overrate the degree of crossover between street racing and other crimes. In reality, there seems to be little difference between street racers and spectators at organised racing events.

The framework within which street racing will be analysed is that of juvenile crime. From my research, it appears that the average street racer is aged in his or her early-twenties. Although this is probably beyond what most criminologists would define as 'juvenile', this article has placed street racers in the juvenile crime context for three reasons:

- i) Street racers are, if not juvenile, certainly young. The vast majority are aged between 16 and 25.
- ii) They share many of the features of youth gangs, in their social exclusivity and territoriality
- iii) Street racing is a transitory activity. Most people do not continue to race for more than 2-3 years

This article will first explain the phenomenon of street racing, before discussing it in a theoretical context.

Methodology

This article arose from a series of interviews which I conducted over a three-week period with various street racers. During that time, I followed what I believe is the major street racing group in Sydney, and attended several illegal races and one legal race meeting. The illegal races were held in Lidcombe, Homebush, Hoxton Park,

Rosehill and south of Campbelltown. The legal race meet was held at Eastern Creek Raceway.

Whilst attending these races, I carried a tape recorder, and was able to discuss racing briefly with some of those present. However, most quotations in this article arose from an extensive set of follow-up interviews which I conducted with street racers, legal drag racers, police and others interested in street racing.

The Participants

At the outset, it must be noted that only a very small proportion of those present at an illegal street race actually compete. Generally 80-90 percent are only there to watch the racing. Yet there are few intrinsic differences between competitors and spectators. If they do not already own a street racing car, most spectators seem to be in the process of preparing their own race-ready vehicle. Essentially, the question of who is actually competing on any given night is merely a matter of chance. Thus all references to 'racers' or 'participants' should be taken to refer to competitors and spectators alike.

The number of people involved in an illegal street meet depends on when it is held. Sunday night crowds are generally the largest, and tend to range from one hundred to three hundred people. Occasionally, the racing attracts far larger crowds. For example, street racing on the evening of Easter Sunday generally attracts over one thousand participants - a degree of motorsport fanaticism which parallels the activities at the Bathurst Raceway on the same evening (Cunneen et al 1989).

As with the crowds at the Bathurst races, attendance at street races fluctuates according to the amount of police resources which are invested in controlling it. The main means of control is by issuing defect notices. If a large number of such notices are issued in a weekend, attendances at races over the following weeks will be reduced. Policing of street racing is discussed in more detail below.

The gender balance of street racers is typical of crowds at most motor racing events - with 90-95 percent being male. The racial background of participants is predominantly Anglo-Saxon, although a significant proportion are children of Italian or Greek migrants. In broad terms, this appears to mirror the racial composition of Australians who attend legal motor-racing meets.

The socio-economic background of the participants is one factor which distinguishes street racing from other forms of juvenile crime. Most are employed on a full-time basis - generally as mechanics, or in other trades such as carpentry, boilermaking or shopfitting. Others tend to be in full-time education - either at high school or TAFE. In very general terms, street racers are from a lower to middle class background, but their participation in employment or full-time education appears to be marginally higher than that of their peers.

A purely functionalist explanation for this is that building cars for street racing is an expensive enterprise. Those with whom I spoke had spent between \$10 000 and \$25 000 on their cars. In addition, most incur significant fines for traffic offences and defect notices. One estimated that he had paid "about \$5000" to the police over four years of racing, describing himself as "one of the luckier ones".

Hence, although the racers recognise that their nocturnal activities are illegal, this does not result in a general alienation from mainstream society. It seems that most street racers have not abandoned many of society's traditional goals, or the conventional means of attaining these goals. This point will be discussed in more detail below.

The Races

Each night, the street racers meet at a central location (usually a McDonalds restaurant). Between 9 and 10 pm, enough people have generally gathered, and it is decided who will race, and whereabouts the race will take place. The crowd then drives in a slow convoy to the predetermined street - usually in a deserted industrial area.

The atmosphere at an illegal street race feels uncannily like a legal motor racing event. Cars are parked all over the nature strips on both sides of the road. Groups of racers line the road, watching the races and talking about cars. There is virtually no alcohol or drugs - only the occasional can of beer or joint of marijuana - and no vandalism seems to have been linked to the racers.

The races themselves are highly organised. On arrival at the venue, start and finish lines are marked a quarter of a mile apart (the traditional distance for drag races). A starter stands between the cars, and drops his or her hands to start the vehicles. A general ethic of fair play prevails, and false starts tend to be greeted with jeers from the crowd.

Unlike street racing in the United States, very little gambling is associated with the Australian illegal racing scene. One organiser claims that this is because "gambling only causes trouble... we prefer to race for a name and a reputation". In the United States, participants have been known to stake thousands of dollars, or even ownership of the car itself, on the outcome of a street race.

The other form of crime which is allegedly associated with street racing is the sale of stolen car parts. While it undoubtedly exists, most people associated with motorsport argue that street racers on the whole purchase legal parts, and that the illegal trade is far more common in motor vehicle workshops than at street races. One of the more senior racers argues that there is a simple explanation.

The guys that take the time to build their car don't steal - they work hard to pay for their cars. A lot of these guys hold second jobs in order to buy car parts. To get their car to perform is usually the most important thing for them at that stage in their life. And they'll sacrifice a tremendous amount of time and effort to attain that, which makes them really appreciate the car.

Thus one of the key distinctions which can be made between street racers and other juvenile criminals is that street racers tend *not* to extend their criminal activities to related areas such as vandalism, theft and fencing stolen goods. In his discussion of various general studies on youth crime, Geoffrey Pearson claims that three core themes emerge - fighting, thieving and drug misuse (1994, 1178). Most street racers, however, do not engage in any of these forms of crime, generally confining their crime to various driving offences. Thus, as will be discussed below, it is difficult to apply subcultural theories to the street racers.

Another key difference between street racing and other forms of juvenile crime is that most street racers make little attempt to conceal their activities from family and friends. Some spoke of bringing interested friends along to witness a race and even of videotaping the races for their parents to watch. It seems that most parents of street racers would prefer to see their children racing than, for example, getting drunk. Thus there is little of the social stigma which tends to accompany other forms of youth crime.

Policing street racing

As soon as the police arrive at a race, the crowd scatters. Thus the main way which they are able to control street racers is not through catching racers committing driving offences, but instead by checking to see that everyone's cars comply with Australian design regulations, and issuing defect notices if they do not comply. This gives police considerable discretionary power, since virtually any car on the road could potentially be 'defected' by the police. Racers tell of having been issued with defect notices because they had installed safety equipment (such as roll-cages or safety harnesses), and for petty breaches such as missing a small rubber grommet on the firewall or having tyres which were fractionally too narrow or too wide. One racer even related the following incident:

I was driving my Dad's brand new Falcon home from a race one night, and the cops pulled me over to check the car. I told them that since it was a new car, they wouldn't be able to defect anything. One of the cops said 'I wouldn't bet on it, mate. If we really wanted to, we could defect you for having loose floor mats.'

Defecting generally occurs in order to move the racers out of a particular area. In this regard, it has much in common with the way in which police have used their powers in the *Summary Offences Act 1988* (NSW) - to remove young people (generally young males) from a public area, thus maintaining the dominant spatiality.

One of the key purposes behind policing street racing seems to be to encourage participants to transfer their activities from public space into the private realm. The officers involved in controlling racing were keen to emphasise the advantages of legal racing over illegal racing. However, legal races are only held monthly, and for the rest of the month, there is no alternative space available for street racers. Thus, as Rob White puts it:

[E]ach attempt to find a space or to create new space is matched by counterposing attempts to regulate this space, and thereby to regulate young people. (1990, 163)

The relationship between legal and illegal racing

The only opportunity for street racers to compete at a legal venue arises on the first Friday of the month, when Eastern Creek Raceway holds a 'street meet'. At these meets, street-legal vehicles are given the opportunity to race on what is presently the only quarter mile dragstrip in Sydney. Two hundred places are made available on the night, and all are invariably taken.

Little, if any, street racing occurs on the first Friday of each month. Certainly, everyone who I had met at the illegal meets seemed to be there when I went to Eastern Creek.

Several interviewees mentioned the fact that in Melbourne, where legal street meets are held weekly, the incidence of illegal racing is far lower than in Sydney. Nonetheless, Eastern Creek Raceway refuses to commit itself to a weekly street racing program.

Thus it could be argued that street racers are essentially legal racers who have been forced onto the streets because of a lack of facilities. This argument is supported by their enthusiasm for legal racing when it is available, and the fact that many street racers also express a desire to enter full-time motor-racing.

Yet the issues are more complex. For most racers, there is an inherent attraction in illegal racing. As one racer put it:

Half of the excitement is doing it and knowing it's illegal. That's the real buzz of the whole thing. And it's at night, and it's that whole psyche. Because there is a real buzz, a real aura, when you're gonna get two cars that are really quick and they're going to have a run.

Thus, while expanding the facilities available for legal racing would help to minimise the amount of street racing which occurs, it is unlikely to ever see the demise of illegal racing. Street racers have been active in Sydney for the past sixty years.¹ As one police officer admitted, "while you've got young males who want to test their prowess with motor vehicles, the problem will always be there, and we can only hope to keep it in reasonable check".

Theoretical frameworks

Most discussions of juvenile justice make little mention of driving offences, and for good reason. Whilst such offences make up a majority of juvenile crimes, they constitute only a tiny proportion of serious offences, since most are simply dealt with by fines. Thus street racing is quite separate from mainstream juvenile crime, and it is a complex task to place it within a suitable theoretical framework.

Conventional theories of juvenile crime, such as subcultural theory and labelling theory are inappropriate in accounting for street racing. Ultimately, the main problem which they are unable to come to terms with is why racers participate in weekend crime, but yet conform to society's norms during the rest of the week? In dealing with the problem, three possible explanations may be postulated.

The first explanation is that street racers tend to be dedicated to racing, and as such, resist engaging in paid work and conforming to society's expectations. However, in order to fund their cars, they reluctantly choose to work. This explanation would

¹. The first recorded street race in Australia took place on Bondi Beach promenade in 1932. Jim Reed, one of Australia's top drag racers, recalls racing at Underwood Road, Homebush during the 1950s and 1960s - yet argues that it was perfectly safe because "we really didn't bother anybody" (Interview). His comments and those of other drag racing administrators support Pearson's thesis that discussions of juvenile justice tend to idealise youth in the past (1994, 1163). The current participants still choose deserted areas in which to race - and if anything are *less* likely to be injured than their predecessors, due to the advent of improved safety devices such as roll cages and safety harnesses.

suggest that racers only accept the norms of mainstream society to the extent necessary to further their racing. Yet if this were so, one would expect the incidence of car theft and fencing stolen car parts among this group to be far higher.

The converse of this explanation is to suggest that street racers are committed to the norms of mainstream society - such as social conformity and the work ethic - and are relatively uncommitted to street racing. Racing can thus be explained as a minor transgression which, for most, will only last a few years. This theory gains support from the fact that street racing crowds fluctuate dramatically depending on the severity of the police response.

However, just as the first explanation places too much emphasis on the racing, the second over-emphasises the extent of conformity of the racers, and discounts the fact that racing is integral to the lives of many participants.

Ultimately, the third and most preferable explanation is that street racing and a commitment to the norms of mainstream society are highly compatible. Integral to this argument is the fact that there is not much difference between participants in street racing and spectators at legal motor racing events. As mentioned above, the same people who attend legal 'street meets' at Eastern Creek Raceway also race on the street. Thus, it seems reasonable to analyse street racers by analysing the norms and values of mainstream society.

Street racing draws its norms from two powerful elements within the dominant culture - masculinity and the symbol of the car.² Various sociological and criminological authors have discussed this link. Rob White focuses on the way in which, for many men, "the car becomes indelibly stamped into their consciousness as a key symbol of masculinity" (1990, 124-25). Chris Cunneen claims that the relationship is one of power, arguing that:

There is a necessity in seeing the way cars and motorbikes are symbolic objects of masculine power. Advertisers have long recognised the links between fantasy, masculinity, domination and 'success' under capitalism. (1985, 85)

In the case of young men, involvement with cars is often an important transitional phase to adulthood. As Bob Connell (1983, 1995) points out, this is associated with an increased preoccupation among these men with technology and speed.

Another factor in this car/masculinity nexus is the growth of motor racing. Connell and Irving make the link thus:

². Thus a parallel can be drawn with Robert Merton's work on strain theory (1938). Merton's theory postulated that crime arose from tension between, on one hand, a cultural emphasis on upward social mobility and wealth acquisition and, on the other, a social structure which, for many, limited or excluded their access to such possibilities. This contradiction between 'ends' and 'means' is replicated in the case of street racers by a tension between a masculine culture which reveres motor racing, and a series of barriers facing youth who wish to compete. The inevitable result is that young people turn to illegal racing. However, the main flaw in this theory is that it does not account for the inherent attraction which illegal racing holds for many participants (see "The relationship between legal and illegal racing").

The rising popularity of motor sport, massively publicised by the motor and oil industry from the Redex reliability trials of the 1950s to Jack Brabham's international racing triumphs of the 1960s, spread the gospel of technique among working-class youth. (1980, 298)

Conclusion

Ultimately, the car comes to be socially constructed as the epitome of masculinity, and motor racing as the public assertion of this masculine power. The response of many young men is to purchase a car, drive dangerously and be entertained by watching motor racing. Yet some opt to participate in racing themselves and, unable to race legally, choose to compete on the street.

The 'deviant' values of street racers may thus be traced back to the values of the dominant culture. Their crime is a result of being blocked from participation in legal motor sport. Yet the mass media is simultaneously bombarding them with images and icons linking sex, power, cars and motor sport. The decision to participate in street racing is not a subversion of the dominant values in society. Rather, it is just one manifestation of the norms of a masculine, car-oriented culture.

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