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**ANALYSIS / Mike Harris hates it and promises to kill it, but accident statistics and public opinion may be vindicating the NDP's notorious pet project**

# Taking more than a passing glance at photo radar

*"Following a thorough review of safety statistics, both here in Ontario and elsewhere, we have concluded that photo radar is simply the government cash grab we had always expected."*

– Mike Harris

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Among the NDP policies that irk in-coming Ontario premier Mike Harris the most is photo radar.

The Progressive Conservative Leader has denounced the device as a government revenue grab disguised as a highway safety measure. He has suggested that photo radar is another step along the road to a society run by an all-intrusive state where law enforcement officials keep tabs on people's every move.

But Mr. Harris may have the wrong story on photo radar.

The new devices haven't turned out to be a big revenue source for the government. And although many factors affect highway safety, the introduction of photo radar has coincided with the first steep drop in the number of fatalities on Ontario roads in four years.

And perhaps even more surprising than the reduced death toll is the rising public acceptance of photo radar. A recent poll by the Environics Research Group found that most Ontario residents approve of the devices being used to fine speeders.

Ontario Provincial Police began using photo radar last Aug. 15, part of a pilot project running to the end of this month. To date, police have issued 240,000 tickets for fines totalling \$16-million. The NDP said photo radar would raise as much as \$200-million annually.

The safety argument will be answered later this year, when the Ministry of Transport re-

leases a report on the pilot project. A report by the ministry earlier this year indicated that the devices have already had a major impact by causing drivers to slow down.

Mr. Harris made his pledge to drop photo radar in March, basing his opinion on only four months of accident statistics at one OPP detachment and at one OPP district. The figures he cited seemed to show that photo radar had no effect on safety.

But something did occur to make Ontario roads safer last year. According to figures compiled by the OPP, the number of highway deaths they investigated plunged to 634, a drop of 118 (16 per cent). It was the first major decline in the fatality toll in four years.

The number of deaths had remained stable in the first four years of the decade, averaging 750 annually.

The reason for the sharp drop in the death toll is open to interpretation. Highway carnage has been in a long-term decline. Experts have attributed past drops in death rates to seat-belt use, campaigns against drunk driving and the introduction of safety features such as air bags.

Determining the precise effect of photo radar, given these other factors, is difficult. Last year also marked the start of graduated drivers licences in Ontario, meaning that inexperienced drivers must wait longer to have full use of the roads.

Mr. Harris said he opposed photo radar because alcohol is the key factor in 40 per cent of all driver fatalities. Excessive speed was cited in 18 per cent of fatal collisions.

Mr. Harris's statistics came from the 1992 Ontario Road Safety Annual Report by the Ministry of Transport, which covers all accidents, including those on city streets.

But looking only at highways, which is where photo radar is in use, the picture is

completely different.

In fatal accidents investigated by the OPP over the past five years – mainly on highways – speed was the most important contributing factor. It was cited in 51 per cent of deaths in 1989, 44 per cent of deaths in 1990, 56 per cent in 1991, 42 per cent in 1992, 28 per cent in 1993 and 25 per cent in 1994.

It was only last year, for the first time in five years, that alcohol exceeded speeding as a cause of death, being cited as a contributing factor in 28 per cent of fatal accidents.

A politician hunting for easy votes might have found it in offering to cancel photo radar two years ago, when the idea was first advanced by provincial officials and was deeply unpopular.

But an Environics poll conducted in April found that a majority of Ontarians, 55 per cent, approved of used photo radar to fine speeders, while 44 per cent were opposed.

"We've actually seen support climbing at a very slow but steady pace since 1993, when we first started asking the question," said Jane Armstrong, a pollster at Environics.

The current poll results are an almost exact reversal of the figures from 1993.

Part of the reason for the growing support is that the longer photo radar is on provincial highways, the more used to it drivers become. Ms. Armstrong also said many respondents approve of the reduction in highway speeds that have been the major observable effect of the introduction of the technology.

The poll also found major variations in support and opposition to the devices.

Women are more strongly in favour of photo radar than men, while the strongest opposition is among young males aged 18 to 24, the group usually found to be the worst drivers in accident surveys. "You get the image of the young male not being too keen," Ms. Armstrong said.

The article EM9529 reprinted above is used in Figure 11.1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials and in Figure 2.2d of the STAT 332 Course Materials.