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Road deaths rise despite record speed camera fines

By Ben Webster, Transport Correspondent

SPEED cameras are catching a record number of drivers, but road deaths are at the highest level for seven years.

Almost 1.8 million speeding offences were detected by cameras in 2003, up 44 per cent on 2002. Road deaths rose slightly to 3,508.

The RAC Foundation called for a review of the Government's road safety strategy.

Motoring offences of all kinds rose in 2003 by 15 per cent to 13.2 million, the highest number on record. More than half the offences involved breaches of parking restrictions. The Home Office figures show that police are increasingly more likely to issue penalties instead of written warnings for less serious offences. Only 6,000 written warnings for speeding were issued in 2003, compared with 35,000 in 1997.

This tends to support the view of motoring groups that cameras offer no opportunity for police to exercise discretion by issuing a warning to those drivers who drift over the limit.

The doubling in speeding offences between 2001 and 2003 was directly linked to the creation of speed camera partnerships in almost every police force area over that period. The partnerships are allowed to keep a proportion of the income from speeding fines to pay the costs of greater camera enforcement. There are now more than 6,000 speed camera sites and the yellow boxes are far more likely to contain live cameras.

The number of breath tests fell in 2003 to its lowest for a decade, but the number of people killed in drink-drive crashes was the highest for seven years. Only 534,000 breath tests were carried out, compared with 800,000 in 1997. There were 560 drink-drive deaths.

Edmund King, director of the RAC Foundation, said that fewer traffic police meant that the most dangerous drivers, including those on drink or drugs, were less likely to be caught: "If cameras are working, why are overall deaths rising? We need a review of road safety policy to challenge the false

assumption that speed is always the most important factor."

The AA Motoring Trust said that the low number of people disqualified under the "totting up rule" indicated that speed cameras were working.