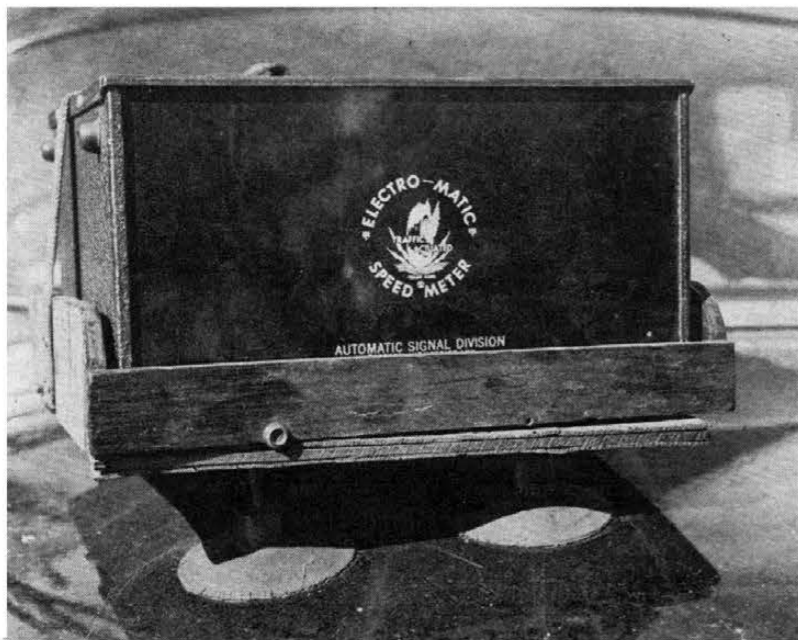


# Radars Speed Controls

Is it accurate? Can you "fool" the machine? Here are the latest facts on the new system



The little black box looks innocent enough, but when perched upon the deck lid of a police car, as it is here, the unit is a headache to careless drivers.

A MOTORIST haled into court on a speeding charge indignantly insisted he couldn't possibly have been doing 40 miles an hour in a 25 mph zone. "I have three rear-view mirrors on my car and didn't see a cop!" he exclaimed as the clincher. "What you need is more foresight and less hindsight," replied a witty traffic referee, fining him \$25. And thus, another victim of radar speed controls bit the dust.

The referee was right too—the old reliable rear-view mirror can't be depended on to keep you from collecting speeding tickets any more. With radar, motorists have to be alert. The new gadget hasn't obsoleted the familiar "chase and pace" method of nabbing speeders yet, but it might someday.

Would that be good or bad? Depends on your viewpoint. Most law enforcement officials favor use of radar speed meters. Many safety groups agree with them. The Traffic Institute of Northwestern University approves such devices provided they "are shown to be capable of accurately and reliably measuring the speed of vehicles and are in proper working order at time of use." The American Automobile Association, on the other hand, isn't completely sold on radar. There are other critics also who fear radar devices might

eventually result in a kind of "push button" justice if abused.

Radars speed meters are encased in metal boxes roughly the size of a portable typewriter. When being used to check traffic speeds they are usually placed in the trunk or on a special platform at the rear of a police car. In use, the car is placed so the beam will be aimed across the road—if the unit is in the trunk, the lid is left partially open. A cable runs from the radar unit to an automatic recording device and meter alongside the officer in the front seat. The meter is calibrated to show how fast a car is going when it passes thru the radar beam. The recorder gives a permanent record of that speed in case the officer gets an argument from the motorist.

According to a survey by the Center for Safety Education at New York University, five basic methods are used to catch speeders. Most popular, used 75 per cent of the time, involves using two police cars. One contains the radar equipment and operator; the second is the "contact car" used to catch violators. Sometimes three cars are used so offenders going in either direction can be nabbed. Sometimes only the radar car is used; the operator shutting down his equipment while he takes off after the

speeder. In other areas a long cable is extended from the radar unit to the reading dial and recorder so the operator, 500 feet or so down the road, can take the reading and have time to flag down the car. Some use a foot patrolman down the road instead of a car and depend on him to stop the speeder.

How accurate are radar units? Very accurate, ordinarily. If kept in good working order and handled properly by a competent operator, they give extremely true readings. And don't pin any faith on some of the methods rumored to be effective in throwing them off. Some time ago the word went around that you could fool radar by fastening a short length of chain to your car's undercarriage. The AAA, however, after consultation with Federal Communications Commission technicians, has reported that, for all practical purposes, there is no way of "jamming" the devices.

Why is radar so popular with law enforcement agencies? One of the big reasons revolves around America's faith in science. A driver stopped for speeding under the "chase and pace" system will often argue with a policeman or judge, questioning the eyesight and accuracy of the officer who tickets him. Put this same guy up against the magic eye of radar and he usually takes his lumps meekly. This reaction has amazed traffic experts—and upped sales of the speed meters. Traffic officials also say radar is helpful in reducing accidents.

Police say speed meters are much safer than other methods of catching speeders. "They eliminate the necessity of officers having to drive at high speeds to apprehend violators—often endangering their own lives and those of the public in their efforts to catch speeders," is the way most officials put it.

The AAA doesn't agree with all these points. J. Allen Davis, general counsel of the Automobile Club of Southern California (an AAA affiliate), has said that "the danger of radar devices is that they measure speed alone and there is a tendency to rely on speed in miles per hour to secure convictions without regard for conditions or whether the speed is actually hazardous to anyone."

He fears it would encourage police to use "hide-out" methods rather than patrol the highways in plain sight. "We know that highway patrolling is the best method of preventing accidents and traf-

fic violations. And the traffic officer patrolling is in a better position to observe and prevent not only speeding but also many other kinds of violations." He also questions whether radar saves police manpower, as its advocates claim. He points out that a radar unit covers only about 500 feet of highway and it takes at least two men, sometimes more, to make good use of the device. Davis claims these men could cover a larger area and accomplish more by patrolling.

A former AAA president, now a board member, Ralph Thomas, has said the new devices could "well be a boon to motorists if used to aid in posting reasonable speed limits and if concentrated on apprehending the relatively few who drive at excessive and dangerous speeds. They can become a curse if used for letter-of-the-law enforcement of rule-of-thumb and generally unrealistic speed limits and to scoop in every motorist who, while driving safely, may inadvertently exceed the speed limit by a mile or two."

Thomas would like to see radar used to check the average speed of cars thru a speed zone. "Surveys show that 85 per cent of all drivers operate at safe speeds regardless of the limits on signs. If we set the speed limits at the 85 per cent figure, we would accomplish two things: Motorists will know that the limit was



Radars control as used by the Birmingham, Mich., police. Officer takes a reading, alerts "contact car" down the road

determined scientifically, and not by some local pressure on politicians or by tradition. And then police would have good reason to arrest the 15 per cent who violate that speed limit. Let radar work for the careful driver, not against him."

Another side of the radar question has been brought out by James A. Hoye, Detroit's traffic director. "It's just not practical for a city of great size," he has stated, adding that Detroit neither uses radar speed meters now nor has plans to do so. "The large flow of traffic on many streets makes them practically worthless for enforcement purposes. For smaller towns, those with one main street

and one principal secondary route, the gadgets are feasible." He feels that as timers were used on main streets, it would drive traffic onto the residential streets "where we certainly don't want it! If we used timers there, we would have to post signs all over the city. And it would be simple for motorists to skip around by another route." He agrees with the AAA stand on patrolling. "I think we can accomplish more by keeping our traffic division officers and scout cars moving around the city as we do now."

Will radar evidence hold up in court? So far it has—although a case has not been passed on by an appellate court as yet. Generally, however, if police can show the device is accurate and reliable and was in good working order at time of arrest, you might as well pay up. Actually, as was mentioned earlier, a far smaller number of motorists bother to go to court when given tickets based on radar checks than do those caught by the pursuit method.

Most communities which use radar advertise it prominently on warning signs, however. In fact, there often seem to be many times more signs than sets! Police officials will tell you frankly that they often use dummy units as "scarecrows." They slow up traffic just as effectively as the real thing, they report. •

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