

EuroRAP: Roads Getting Safer: Too Many Avoidable Deaths

Britain's roads are getting safer to drive on, according to an AA Motoring Trust report that assesses the risk of road users being killed or seriously injured. The report, EuroRAP 2005: British Results, analyses accident data from 850 main roads and colour-codes them on Risk-Rate maps under standards set by the European Road Assessment Programme (EuroRAP). The Trust's report also reveals that if similar road types, such as single carriageway roads, with above-average risk rates improved to just the average safety rating, more than 200 lives would be saved annually.

A "mini massacre" of motorcyclists on some rural main roads continues to undermine significant safety improvements. The impact of motorcycling is such that the most high-risk road listed – the A537, Buxton-Macclesfield – would be among Britain's safer roads if there were no motorcycle accidents.

The key results from the report are:

- British roads are getting safer – roads rated as high- or medium-risk for death and serious injury have fallen by almost 30 per cent since 2002;
- The risk of death or serious injury on Britain's roads is one of the lowest in Europe;
- Highest-risk roads are ten times more dangerous than the safest;
- Large numbers of motorcycling accidents on some rural roads undermine the overall improvement in the safety of Britain's highways;
- On the most dangerous stretches of road, one person, and as many as seven, is killed or seriously injured for every mile over the three-year measurement period;
- 60 per cent of road deaths (more than 70 per cent in Scotland) occur outside built-up areas, mostly on single carriageway roads.

The AA Motoring Trust's recommendations for reducing fatal and serious collisions are:

- Set a target and a budget to make all higher-risk roads of a similar type perform as well as the average rating. This would reduce collisions by 20 per cent, and save about 200 lives and 1,500 serious injuries annually;
- Focus on proven, cost-effective improvements, such as: installing crash barriers to prevent head-on collisions and "run-off" accidents; realigning junctions; improving white lining and traffic signing;
- Achieve speed compliance on high-risk roads by using conventional and vehicle-activated speed limit signs, and highly visible speed cameras on sections known to be dangerous.

Bert Morris, director of the AA Motoring Trust says: "We now know the roads where deaths and serious injuries are routine and predictable. Our analysis highlights where resources can be targeted to save most lives. 'Big-wins' in road safety, such as compulsory seatbelt wearing or changing attitudes to drink-driving have saved thousands of lives.

"The report shows how relatively simple road-engineering solutions, together with speed compliance technology, on 'unforgiving' roads could also slash the death toll on British roads. All roads can be made much safer for the great majority of responsible road users."

Morris adds: "The identification of the relative dangers of British roads has yet to provoke a major public response. There would be an outcry if similar league tables were published about the relative safety of different stretches of railway, even though death and injury rates are far lower than on roads."

The AA Motoring Trust's EuroRAP Risk-Rate map for Britain shows 'higher-risk' roads in black (high) or red (medium-high). Medium-risk roads are coloured yellow, low-medium risk roads are light green and low-risk roads dark green. The map tells drivers how their risk of being in a crash changes significantly as they move from one stretch of road to another.

Most improved roads (Table 1)

The report lists 18 roads that have recorded a significant reduction in fatal and serious collisions of between 34 per cent and 78 per cent. For example, the A505, Leighton Buzzard-A5, where the number of fatal and serious collisions was reduced from 18 to 4 after speed-limit reduction and enforcement with fixed and mobile cameras; and the A28 Ashford-Margate, listed as "higher-risk" in 2003, now features as a "most improved" as a result of junction improvements, resurfacing, and installation of cycling and pedestrian facilities.

Consistently higher-risk roads (Table 2)

These are roads (coloured black and red) that continue to appear as high-risk on the annual Risk-Rate map and also have high accident density.

- Typically they are single-carriageway roads running through rural, often hilly, areas such as the Peak District;
- Fatal and serious collisions have fallen on some of these roads but they remain "higher-risk" because risk-rates on other roads are reducing more rapidly. For example, the A534 in Cheshire, from the Welsh border to Nantwich, remains "higher risk" even though fatal and serious collisions reduced from 35 to 19 a 46 per cent reduction.

Higher-risk roads with high motorcycle involvement in collisions (Table 3)

- Motorcycle-involved accidents are often either in, or on the way to, attractive destinations, such as national parks or the coast;
- Last year's worst performing road (the A537, Macclesfield-Buxton) suffered 27 fatal and serious collisions, of which 26 involved motorcycles. Although a major reduction in collisions was achieved in the 2001-2003 period (22 fatal and serious accidents, 20 involving motorcycles), the road heads the list again this year;
- Were motorcycle accidents to be removed from the statistics, the A537 would be among Britain's safer roads;
- On more than 160 (19 per cent) of the 850 roads studied, at least one third of all fatal and serious collisions involved motorcycles;
- These figures show that road-user education is not enough. Also needed is action, involving road engineering, as well as high-profile enforcement to deter speeding, to cut accidents and to reduce the severity of injuries in accidents that do occur.

Higher-risk roads with motorcycle risk removed (Table 4)

These are mostly single-carriageway roads where:

- There is greater risk of high speed, head-on crashes;
- Junction crashes are high-impact;
- Vulnerable road users are at risk.

The roads are almost entirely rural or semi-urban. Many of them are stretches of road through rural areas, villages and the outskirts of towns, where the higher concentration of junctions, with the presence of pedestrians and cyclists, raises the risk of serious collisions. For example, the A1101 where the primary network goes through the centre of Wisbech and the A61 between Barnsley and Wakefield that passes through several villages.

Britain compared with other countries (Table 5)

- The risk rate on Britain's roads is one of the lowest in Europe;
- The British risk rate is similar to that of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland;
- The British risk rate for single-carriageway roads is higher than that of Sweden a 12.4 fatal collision rate per billion km compared to 7.7 in Sweden. However, similar roads in Sweden tend to bypass towns and villages, and have central crash barriers on some single-carriageway roads. The risk rate for single-carriageway roads in Spain is 23.2.

The road look-up table giving details for over 850 sections of inter-urban roads in mainland Britain can be found at www.eurorap.org.