

Young male drivers - a danger to themselves and others at night

As darker evenings approach, an AA Motoring Trust report reveals some young men's alarming disregard for their own and others' safety when driving at night - and that some passengers, who are unconcerned that the driver has been drinking, can make matters worse by encouraging reckless driving.

Night-time Accidents, a two-year study by UCL, jointly funded by the AA Trust and the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund, is the first to examine night-time experiences and attitudes of drivers, partly through focus group interviews. It reveals the worrying extent to which some young men push themselves and their cars to the limit. Casualty figures show just how often things do go wrong for this group at night, with fatal and serious consequences.

The report shows young male drivers (17-20) to be seven times more at risk than all male drivers. However, between the hours of 2am and 5am, when their risk is 17 times higher, about 225 are killed or seriously injured annually - the equivalent of 20 football teams. Those slightly older (21-25) have twice the risk, but this increases to almost three times between 2am and 5am.

"Inexperienced driving, a cavalier attitude to life, a night-time social life involving alcohol, and driving too fast, are combining to kill and maim young people and other road users every night of the week," says Andrew Howard, the AA Trusts Head of Road Safety.

"While most young drivers have the skills to drive safely, this study identifies a dangerous minority of thrill-seeking young male drivers. In the short term, urgent action, with targeted police enforcement, is required to identify them and get them off the road. The study also highlights why improving young men's *attitude* to driving is as important as improving their *ability* to drive, and the government should look again at how this can be achieved."

Comments from young men in the focus groups:

- *Its the adrenalin rush and youre pushing things to the limit -- many like testing themselves and their cars to the limit, often on unlit rural roads*
- *Its different when youre drunk, you dont really care when youre driving -- it is clear that some regularly drink and drive, despite being the designated driver among a group*
- *'It depends on how many theyve had -- there appears to be little pressure for abstinence from passengers of designated drivers*
- *Theres not many coppers[on country roads]-- some avoid main roads to steer clear of police and speed cameras; but many talk of difficulties seeing on unlit rural roads, and relief when reaching roads with streetlights.*
- *'Youre constantly looking over your shoulder to make sure theyre not being sick or anything -- passengers are seen as a big distraction at night*
- *I think the only way youre going to learn is to get yourself into that situation -- a few see having a road accident as a rite of passage in acquiring driving experience*
- *We landed upside down with the engine running and the radio on full blast. Oh by the way the whole time I had been on the phone to friend -- some are proud of dangerous experiences that they had survived*
- *Theres nobody coming the other way, youd be able to see the lights-- some believe it safer to speed at night because an absence of oncoming lights means a clear road ahead: an alarming mismatch between perceived risk and known casualty numbers. Others thought that speed limits should be higher at night, as there was less traffic*
- *It dont respond the same does it? -- many drive older cars to which they sometimes add improvements to boost performance or image. These cars were often driven overloaded, even though drivers know that passengers affect the handling ability of the car*

Young women are much less of a risk, and tend to be more careful than young men. Those aged between 17 and 20 have between two and three times the risk of all women, whatever the time of day.

None in the focus groups drives home from nightclubs late at night, mainly because young women tend to be passengers in cars driven by young men:

- *Its cheaper than a taxi or ...but if youre battered [drunk] and someone says theres a lift here if youre quick -- young women admit that they accept lifts with drivers who have been drinking. This is especially true in rural areas, where there is poor public transport, few and expensive taxis - or when they have been drinking themselves*

Parents, particularly those with girls below driving age, may want to look closer at whether their daughters should accept lifts from young male drivers.

Andrew Howard adds, "It is difficult for young people to enjoy an evening social life without cars, particularly in rural areas. Motoring is also expensive and can be less safe for young drivers, who often have to run older cars that lack the latest safety features and handling abilities. But we must address young men's worrying lack of understanding about driving risks at night,

and a tolerance of drink-driving, bad behaviour and overloading in cars."

The AA Trust says there is an urgent need:

- for tough measures to remove from behind wheel the irresponsible, dangerous minority of young male drivers who display the worst kind of anti-social behaviour by flouting driving conventions and putting others at risk
- for a major initiative, involving central and local government, motoring organisations, insurance and motor industries, to work *with* young people to develop risk-awareness programmes and to convince them that risk-taking is not for the road, where innocent road users suffer when things go wrong
- to find ways of giving young drivers much more experience behind the wheel - night and day - in the company of experienced drivers *before* taking the driving test. Parents can play an important role but many are deterred from helping by high loadings on their insurance premiums.
- for newly qualified drivers to use a *Learner Driver Log Book* that includes ways to help develop better night-time driving experience

Other considerations include:

- measures to reduce young drivers exposure to risk at night. However, this could unacceptably restrict employment and general mobility for young people. A voluntary option for encouraging fewer night-time car journeys and cheaper insurance premiums is being piloted by Norwich Union, which uses black-box technology to monitor how many hours are driven at higher-risk times, such as at night, and adjusts the insurance premium accordingly
- studies (*Baughan and Simpson 2002*) show a link between accidents and passengers in the car with young drivers. Restricting the number of passengers in the cars of newly-qualified drivers could reduce accidents
- The AA Motoring Trust has proposed piloting a probationary drivers code, which would address these and other concerns. Breaching the code would not be an offence but could increase penalties once a further offence is committed

NOTES TO EDITORS: [Night-time accidents](#) (PDF 229K) was produced for the AA Trust by Heather Ward and Sandy Robertson (Centre for Transport Studies, UCL) with Nigel Shepherd and Mary Thomas from consultants FaberMaunsell Ltd and was funded jointly by the AA Trust and the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund. The two-year study involved analysis of government road casualty and traffic data and, for the first time, combining this information with governments diary-based National Travel Survey. The report:

- contains interviews with young people to elicit their concerns, attitudes and beliefs about the problems of night-time driving. And an evaluation of existing data on casualties rates on different roads at different times of day
- assesses what is known about young drivers exposure to risk at night, and analyses relevant accident data to provide a picture of the size of the potential problem areas, and gaps in current knowledge
- identifies younger peoples attitudes, concerns and beliefs about the problems of night-time driving
- considers what measures could address the problems and what further research is needed to clarify remedial actions

Background

Of the 37,215 road deaths and serious injuries in Britain in 2003, more than a third (13,934) happened between 7.00pm and 8.00am. Twice as many occurred on Friday and Saturday nights than other on days of the week -- the variation is by day of the week rather than seasonal.

Over the two years 2000-1, between 02.00 and 04.59, there were 249 male drivers who were killed or seriously injured and 38 female driver casualties.

There were 150 non-driver car-occupants who were killed or seriously injured the same two-year period.

Only 25 per cent of travel by car drivers is undertaken at night (between 7pm and 8am), yet 40 per cent of all serious injuries and deaths occur in this period, and they feature a disproportionately high number of young men.

The risk for the youngest group of male drivers remains much higher than that of other male age groups, with a large difference in the early evening becoming larger again between 10pm and 2am. However, there is little difference in risk between young men and all other male drivers between 10pm and 2am.

Between the ages of 20 and 39 years, deaths of male drivers in drink-driving accidents accounts for up to 41 per cent of all driver deaths.

Since 1999, there has been a steady rise in drink-driving casualties.

Young men are involved in more accidents than young women, partly because young men do more driving than young women. Young mens attitude to driving and a propensity to take more risks remains a major problem.

Accidents and road types

On rural (non built-up) roads:

- young male and female drivers are killed or seriously injured in large numbers relative to other age groups
- one in four male drivers killed or seriously injured is under 25
- about twice as many young men under 25 years are killed or seriously injured than young women of the same age
- the number of driver casualties declines sharply after the age of 25

On built-up main (A) roads:

- deaths and serious injuries of male drivers under 25 is about 75 per cent of that for rural roads. For female drivers it is about 50 per cent

On built-up B, C and unclassified roads

- the number of male drivers between 17 and 20 years killed or seriously injured is almost the same as that for rural (main) roads
- among female drivers, the highest number of casualties are in the age group between 21 and 25 years

Other rural roads (B, C and unclassified)

- there is a very high incidence of young male casualties compared to drivers of all ages and gender