

# **DERF**



## **The Driver Education Research Foundation**

DERF was established in 2001 and was officially launched, in March 2004 at the House of Lords.

**DERF's Chief Executive and  
Research DIRECTOR**

**is**

**Professor Peter RUSSELL**

**BA.; MA: D.Prof.: FIMTD; FCIEA.**

(Europe's **ONLY** Professor of Driver EDUCATION)

# **BAD DRIVER BEHAVIOUR**

is the **only** cause of most Road Traffic Crashes

Very few really bad drivers kill other people; most serious road crashes are caused by normally good safe drivers having a bad moment, such as being distracted; or by two or more drivers each taking an apparently minor risk at the same time. (Dangerous, or consistently bad, drivers most usually kill themselves in solitary single-vehicle crashes).

However, when road traffic crashes are analysed, all too often it is easy to lose sight of the genuine cause, because of the obvious effects. It is not enough to examine the apparent causes of road crashes; it is essential to identify the underlying reasons that make people behave in an irrational moment of stupidity.

For example: What is the essential cause of a standard nose-to-tail collision?

Is it...

Following too fast?

Following too closely? or

Not concentrating on potential traffic changes ahead?

**The answer doesn't matter, because the questions are wrong.**

The significant question that should be asked, is 'why do all drivers drive so closely when following other traffic?'.  
**Do they assume they can always stop in time?**  
**Do they not think about the risk at all?**  
**Do they realise the risk but still not care?**  
(This is the critical factor used by the police in evidence for 'reckless driving' charges!).

Or could it be that they are keeping the gap closed up to prevent others overtaking and then cutting in?

**(This could be considered crucial evidence in a 'causing death by dangerous driving' case!) A vehicle must be the most lethal murder weapon ever.**

- In 97.5% of all car crashes faulty driver behaviour or road users' actions are a significant cause.
- In 88.5% of car crashes, drivers' actions are the **only** cause.

The three main driving behaviour characteristics most likely to cause road traffic crashes are:

- 1. Following too closely; causing nose to tail shunts;**
- 2. Turning right unsafely, and hitting oncoming or emerging traffic;**
- 3. Overtaking unsafely – and, of course, this is the real killer.**

This is how each of these potential death risks can readily be avoided:

**1. Never allow yourself to be fourth (or more) in any traffic queue: always drop back 5 seconds from the traffic ahead of you. Naturally you need to think in times rather than distance; half a mile will be covered in 30 seconds.**

**2. Confirm your safe arrival point before commencing any right turn; if you cannot begin wait where you can do so safely.**

**3. Appreciate the distances covered in any overtaking situation and confirm**

**that the time needed to complete the action is safely available: holding back whilst waiting for a clear road ahead is essential. It takes at least half a mile (or half a minute!) to overtake another vehicle doing 55 mph on a single carriageway. Ask yourself can you really guarantee the road ahead is clear for thirty seconds? Also ask yourself what do you do if the overtaken driver increases speed!??!**

The following factors are pertinent to **'Crash Risk Assessment'** and to all associated Advanced driver training programmes:

- All drivers' personal risk potential must be identified, defined, discussed and agreed to be reduced;
- All specific wrong or hazy attitudes of the drivers need to be changed, or corrected, where necessary and possible;
- The role of the advanced driver trainer is to instil safer driving attitudes by use of highly skilful mentoring and coaching skills. This is not done by 'showing off their own abilities or skills';

Proper safe driving assessments and good driver training programmes are based around a formula of coaching and mentoring, and are aimed at:

- **developing drivers' natural skills**
- **recognising and minimising drivers' personal risk; and**
- **re-appraising drivers' behaviour towards other road users.**

It is worth noting that the word 'speed' as a cause of vehicle crashes has not been mentioned at all. A lot of rubbish is talked about with regard to speed as a cause of road crashes. The term speed is not a cause of anything. However, ***inappropriate speed*** – in any circumstance is dangerous and can easily result in death and injury. A driver exceeding the speed limit is only a significant factor in fewer than 5.9% of all road deaths. Yet ***'inappropriate speed'*** is a factor in more than 74% percent.

There is a degree of logic in this that often escapes the thoughts of those who latch on to the simplistic message that ***speed kills***. Inappropriate speed may be as low as ten mph in a busy shopping area. Eighty miles an hour on a motorway in lane three may often be the **ONLY** appropriate speed for that lane; because this is the speed at which all other vehicles are driving. Not only would it be inappropriate, but it could be considered reckless to try to drive at fifty mph in this outer, overtaking, lane.

This is not to condone breaking speed limits, but that particular example, quoted above, was initiated thirty years ago by Sussex Chief Constable, Roger Birch, when he was Chairman of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), and I was a member of PACTS's Road Behaviour Group, who stated that motorists would not be prosecuted on motorways for driving safely at speeds up to 80 mph: this allowed for the 10% speedometer reading error at 70 mph plus a slight margin. In recent years this principle has completely changed with arguments for 'zero tolerance' (although there must always be a 10% error at 30mph allowed for in vehicle speedometers) and where digital cameras are replacing the bobby in the BMW. Certainly speed limits are much more rigorously enforced these days, even in Sussex. .

## Black Cats and Black Ice

There are three phrases which regularly occur in Car Crash Insurance Claims every year. First of all is the alleged appearance of black cats which apparently run across the road causing the pet-loving driver to swerve to avoid them and, as a consequence, sideswipes someone's Rolls Royce parked at the kerbside, clouts a lamp post or just does some serious own vehicle damage. Not their fault at all; and they dare not admit to daydreaming, falling asleep or other lack of attention. The second phrase is 'black ice'. This apparently creates many incidents when drivers almost negotiate roundabouts or junctions and the sudden and hidden lack of adhesion to the road caused the driver to ... well you know the sort of thing. Regrettably black cats tend to be objects of fantasy that drivers invent when they have lost control of their car and are too embarrassed to state they were looking away from the road, or inspecting the inside of their eyelids when they should have been looking where they are going. Genuine black ice is a different matter. The term black ice applies when light rain falls onto an already freezing road surface. The ice that forms as a result is very thin and hardly noticeable until drivers try to change direction or speed. It is then that tyres lose their grip and a skid occurs.

The third is just one word! "**SUDDENLY**". It often occurs at the beginning of an excuse for '**not paying attention**'; and proliferates in Insurance Claims.

There is nothing that really happens suddenly; buses stop regularly; traffic lights often cause traffic bunching; trucks often swing out right before turning left. Pedestrians have been known to run across the road without looking or caring for their own safety: how would you feel if you killed an only young child who suddenly followed a ball across the road? We hope your answer would really include the words '**extremely guilty**'. Because none of the above circumstances will ever have happened suddenly! Where was your observation, 5, 4, 3 or even two seconds before the incident occurred?

Nowadays all company drivers need to learn to moderate their driving to suit all current and new heavily enforced safety standards. However this action will still not necessarily reduce crashes and may even increase the number of 'nose-to-tail' shunts. There is a general agreement that rigidly enforced speed limits increase the nose-to-tail risk by bunching motorists together. This can be seen on any open road where a police vehicle is driving at the head of the traffic queue; semi-comatose drivers can often be seen overtaking in lane three only to brake without mirror use to the consternation of the next following sleepyhead.

Nevertheless speed cameras and the increased risk of losing a driving licence must have an immediate effect on the way all drivers behave on the roads. This of course is part of a professional approach to assessment and training of company drivers. Naturally all drivers must always drive within the speed limits, but they must also drive at an appropriate speed for the road, traffic and weather conditions at all times.

Properly prepared advanced driver training programmes are designed to gain the active cooperation of each delegate driver to condition short-term behavioural changes towards risk-taking in their own driving. Long-term changes need the support of the company's 'Risk Management Team' as well. Each successful course

must necessarily be written around each individual company's own requirements. Individual drivers may even need a personal programme devised just for them.

Generally speaking, drivers need to learn three basic principles of risk-free driving.

- 1. They need to look much further ahead than they previously have.**
- 2. They need to think, proactively, about what they will be doing in five, ten or even thirty seconds' time.**
- 3. They need to decelerate sooner, to give themselves enough time to cope.**

These three statements are so simple that you could assume that there is no need to say them. You are wrong. There are two million severe crash reasons every year; plus a further ten million unnecessary and easily avoidable incidents, that hit and hurt every company's profits to a most swingeing tune.

Successive Ministers for Roads once initiated ten-year targets to reduce road deaths by one third before the end of the decade. This almost happened, but most of the country's efforts so far have been aimed at vehicle and road design. Sadly the real target has to be individual driver's own driving behaviour.

We know that safety improvements are constantly being added to make vehicles safer. Seat belts, Air bags, ABS, SIPS, passenger friendly bits and pieces all of which are designed to make less impact on those inside and out when they meet potentially violent ends. We know too, that road humps and pedestrian-friendly streets may cause many drivers to slow down, but they also create stress, annoyance and even anger in some drivers.

Safer cars kill fewer people; but some of those who might have died before, now suffer severe injuries instead. The annual car-crash rate has stayed the same for many years; it is just that crashes that used to kill, now often only seriously injure other road users.

Statistically, company and fleet drivers stand a one in three chance of being involved in some form of road traffic crash every year. The likelihood is even greater for those who cover more than 12, to 20,000 miles, or more per year. Some reasons are more difficult to identify and eradicate. A few of them are peculiar to the role that the driver plays in the company; others are dependent upon their personalities and individual characteristics.

There is a simple reason for most of this. Average drivers often genuinely believe themselves to be invincible. It is like buying tickets in the national lottery, '**someone else always gets the big prize**'. Unlike the lottery there are easy ways in which everyone can increase their chances of winning in the road safety stakes. There are obvious warning signs to keep drivers safe no matter what else happens.

And yet, the most likely psychological reason is that these road users ignore the statistics and drive on auto-pilot without any consideration about risk, because their own thoughts are on other matters at the time? This is certainly the problem with most drivers! It may be impossible to concentrate solely on the road ahead for hours

on end, but it is still quite possible to plan your driving and channel your concentration into basic safety procedures.

Have you ever put your head out of a moving railway carriage window? The feeling of the fresh air can be exhilarating; until you realise the risk.

What happens when another train is passing in the other direction?

What happens if another idiot puts his head through one of the other train's window at the same time?

If you are very tall would you pray that your proponent was very, very short? The real question you should ask though is 'why take the risk in the first place?'

Yet most motorists do the equivalent of 'sticking their head out of the carriage window' hundreds of times on every journey they take.



### Road Signs are there for a purpose

It is a cogent thought that if a rail passenger put his head out of a carriage window on every journey, he wouldn't remain a rail passenger for long. By the same token very bad drivers don't last long either. Examination of driving crash statistics often show that most are caused by occasional incidents of bad driving, rather than by consistently bad drivers. But risk patterns on the roads often go unnoticed. It is only when two or more drivers make mistakes of speed or positioning at the **same** time and place that they are noticed. Similarly to stick your head out of any moving train window is risky at any time. However, the very first time may easily kill you, because of other circumstances beyond your control. What could your relatives say to the relatives of the other idiot who stuck his head out of the other train at the same time as you did?

In truth, most drivers ignore risk because they do not want to think about it. More importantly, most road users refuse to think about their own personal risk in relation to its probability. Yet it is easy to see that some risks are much greater than others. Rail users tend not to put their heads out of windows because of the buffeting and noise. That is why railway 'head-crashes' are relatively rare. But similar stupid errors when driving are not always accompanied by excessive noise and wind. Some drivers would possibly try to ensure that if they did put their head out of an open window they would pray that no other driver put themselves at risk at the same time. How can they possibly believe that is possible?

It is not the dangerous drivers who are the cause of most of the 3000 plus deaths on the road each year which are directly attributable to driver error. It is the average drivers who just happen to make one of their habitual minor mistakes in driving at the same time as someone else doing the same. If I cut a corner it will probably be safe – provided no one else decides to approach that corner from the opposite direction too fast. Whose fault will it be then? Not mine, surely because I often do it and have always got away with it before.

Driver assessment and improvement training courses make drivers more aware by involving them in the whole of what they are doing. Drivers are then able to learn to desire to drive pro-actively rather than re-actively.

- **Annually more than 500,000 crashes cause death or injury to road users**
  - **About one quarter of them involve company vehicles and drivers**
  - **Company drivers are at risk more than most other groups of drivers**
  - **Company drivers have a 67% chance of a crash every year.**
  - **A further 1,500,000 crashes cause severe vehicle damage only**
  - **12 million incidents are reported annually (from a total of 35 million drivers)**
  - **Road traffic crashes killed 3,150 in 2005• About 39, 000 road users were seriously injured – for life;**
  - **Over 290,000 suffered recoverable injuries;**
  - **More 15-38 old people die from road crashes than from any other cause;**
  - **Each road death costs the country's GNP over one million pounds;**
  - **Serious injuries must cost even more in terms of long-term care;**
  - **Crash avoidance courses cost relatively very little; but only if they work;**
- And yet this was seen as a good year for road death crash statistics.**

**Perhaps those involved in clearing up after road crashes should have a greater role to play in "Safer Driver" Training?**

**Perhaps, penalties for the offence of THOUGHT-LESS Driving should be included in those for Dangerous and Reckless Driving?**

**Peter Russell  
Professor of Road Safety Education  
DRIVER EDUCATION RESEARCH FOUNDATION  
SOUTHAMPTON SO18 1JB**

**Tel 02380 582480**

[profpeterrussell2@gmail.com](mailto:profpeterrussell2@gmail.com)

[www.derf.org.uk](http://www.derf.org.uk)

[www.ider.org.uk](http://www.ider.org.uk)

Dated 1<sup>st</sup> March 2017

© 01032017 DERF.Org.UK