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«Speed»

***Summary
Stephen Stradling***

Why do drivers speed?

There are three kinds of reasons why drivers drive faster than the statutory speed limits. First because they can: modern cars are uniformly capable of speeds in excess of the speed limit (why?), modern roads – in developed countries – are well-engineered and well-surfaced, detection and enforcement is intermittent. Second because they feel under some pressure to exceed the speed limit, typically time pressure and/or peer pressure. Third because some drivers – but only some, perhaps 1 in 5 – like driving fast.

How many drivers speed?

In two recent large-scale studies, one for the UK government (Stradling et al., 2008) and one for the Scottish government (Collins et al., 2008), car drivers indicated how often in the last 3 months they had:

- 'driven in a built-up area (where there is a 30 mph limit)' at 35 mph, 40 mph and 50 mph;
- 'driven on a single-carriageway A road (where there is a 60 mph limit)' at 70 mph and 80 mph; and
- 'driven on a dual carriageway (where there is a 70 mph limit)' at 80 mph and 90 mph.

Responses were on six-point scales from 'most days' to 'never'. Table 1 summarises the response distribution from the Scottish study.

In the last 3 months how often have you ...	Often: Most days or 3 to 5 times / week	Sometimes: twice a week to once a month	Rarely or never
Driven at 35 mph in a 30 mph limit	31	18	51
Driven at 40 mph in a 30 mph limit	11	9	80
Driven at 50 mph or more in a 30 mph limit	3	2	96
Driven at 70 mph in a 60 mph limit	10	14	76
Driven at 80 mph in a 60 mph limit	2	4	95
Driven at 80 mph in a 70 mph limit	6	16	78
Driven at 90 mph in a 70 mph limit	1	3	96

Table 1:
Scottish study

Responses fell into three clusters. Table 2 gives the characteristics of the three clusters for the Scottish sample and Table 3 for the UK sample. In both studies above half the drivers self-report as generally compliant (Cluster 1); a third indicate they sometimes drive at 10 mph above the speed limit, but no more than that (Cluster 2); and Cluster 3 comprises around 1 in 7 car drivers who we might call 'problem speeders'. In the Scottish study 46 % of young (17 to 24 year old) male drivers were in Cluster 3.

In the last 3 months how often have you ... [more often than rarely]	C1 Compliers	C2 Exceeders	C3 Excessives
N = 784 Percent of sample	55	32	13
Driven at 35 mph in a 30 mph limit	8	100	97
Driven at 40 mph in a 30 mph limit	1	28	69
Driven at 50 mph or more in a 30 mph limit	0	2	29
Driven at 70 mph in a 60 mph limit	10	22	83
Driven at 80 mph in a 60 mph limit	1	2	33
Driven at 80 mph in a 70 mph limit	10	22	71
Driven at 90 mph in a 70 mph limit	1	2	23

Table 2:
Scottish study

In the last 3 months how often have you ... [more often than rarely]	C1 Compliers	C2 Exceeders	C3 Excessives
N = 686 Percent of sample	52	33	14
Driven at 35 mph in a 30 mph limit	19	98	97
Driven at 40 mph in a 30 mph limit	0	33	78
Driven at 50 mph or more in a 30 mph limit	3	2	24
Driven at 70 mph in a 60 mph limit	12	38	95
Driven at 80 mph in a 60 mph limit	2	4	48
Driven at 80 mph in a 70 mph limit	12	40	92
Driven at 90 mph in a 70 mph limit	1	3	50

Table 3:
UK study

Twice as many (19 % : 9 %) of the Cluster 3 drivers reported having been involved in a traffic collision within the previous 3 years for which they were wholly or partly to blame.

In the UK study drivers were asked about the kinds of circumstances under which they would break the speed limit. Factor analysis showed 2 broad classes of reasons:

- Opportunistic reasons: I would break the speed limit: when overtaking (63 %); when I am running late (41 %); on an empty road at night (40 %); on an empty road in the daytime (39 %)
- Reactive reasons: I would break the speed limit: when I am feeling angry (15 %); when someone is driving close behind me (15 %); when I am feeling stressed (14 %); when trying to see what my car can do (7 %); in order to stay awake (2 %).

We estimated that around 55 % of drivers would speed for opportunistic reasons – and thus 45 % would not, despite the opportunity of the open road and the pressure of running late. 9 % would also speed for reactive reasons (and intriguingly hardly any reported that they would only speed for reactive reasons).

One third of those in Cluster 3 said they would speed for both opportunistic and reactive reasons. 39 % of these agreed with the statement 'I really enjoy driving fast' (compared to 20 % for the sample as a whole); 78 % agreed that 'I think it will always be difficult for me to keep to the speed limit (i.e., difficult not to drive faster)'; 16 % agreed that 'When driving I like to feel at risk' (compared to 3 % overall) – and 39 % had been involved in a traffic collision within the previous 3 years for which they were wholly or partly to blame.

Conclusion

Why do drivers speed? Most, over half, don't – at least in the UK, if we trust their anonymous self-report data. Around a third sometimes, but only sometimes, drive 10 mph over the limit, but no more.

There is a small, but dangerous, problem group of car drivers who drive fast and crash more. More of the young and male belong to this group – but Cluster 3 drivers are not all male and not all young.

For the psychologist the message is clear: these people need help!

References

E. Collins, C. Eynon, P. MacLeod, S. Stradling, L. Crinson, J. Scoons & J. Broughton (2008). Rural Road Safety: Drivers and Driving: Research Report. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

S. Stradling, P. Broughton, N. Kinnear, C. O'Dolan, R. Fuller, H. Bates, M. Gormley & B. Hannigan (2008). Understanding Inappropriate High Speed: A Quantitative Analysis. Road Safety Research Report No. 93. London: Department for Transport.