

Rule-breaking, risk-taking and road safety

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Cardiff researchers have discovered that culture and the attitudes of road users towards risk are fundamental in explaining road traffic safety in the UK and around the world.

The research compared rates of death and injury caused by road incidents with the willingness to follow the rules across different countries. The results found that those countries with a high level of ‘corruption’ (i.e. a measure of the population’s non-compliance towards rules) had higher rates of [road traffic](#) deaths and injuries.

The implications of these findings according to the researchers - Dr Peter Wells, Cardiff Business School and Research Associate at the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS), and Professor Malcolm Beynon, also of Cardiff Business School - are that an understanding of the rules and the development of safer vehicles, do not necessarily lead to safer outcomes.

Most road traffic incidents are mainly attributable to human error and taking unnecessary risks.

For instance in the UK, the research found that despite being one of the safest countries in the world for drivers, pedestrians, cyclists and other road users; culturally there are distinct high-risk, rule averse behaviours among certain social groups. For example, young men who steal cars in order to go 'joy riding' or 'airbag surfing', and the so-called 'born-again' bikers who return to using a motorbike after some years of absence. Both groups have a notably higher mortality than average.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), if present trends continue, road [traffic deaths](#) and injuries are projected to become the third-leading contributor to the global burden of disease and injury by 2020.

The research also explored the social meaning of owning a car and the implications of increasing numbers of vehicles on the road.

"Over time the cultural position of the car has changed, with a stronger emphasis on the car as a protected personal space within which to safely traverse a hostile urban environment." Dr Wells commented.

However, the growing use of the car has cumulatively resulted in social dysfunction because it has resulted in the contemporary crisis of road traffic deaths and injuries

The outcomes of the research suggest that campaigns to change 'hearts and minds', among all categories of road users are at least as important as engineering changes to vehicles and advances in safety technology.

"Putting legal frameworks in place is clearly a starting point and having the resources to enforce such frameworks is also important.

"However, our research suggests that road traffic safety is fundamentally explained by the [attitudes](#) of [road users](#), and hence it is a battle for hearts and minds. We need to understand a lot more about how different cultures and sub-cultures engage with motor vehicles, and what the consequences are for road traffic deaths and injuries" Dr Wells added.

Provided by Cardiff University

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