Background

Are those who commit serious traffic offences normally law-abiding members of the public or are they likely to be involved in other types of crime? This report seeks to answer this question by examining the extent to which anti-social behaviour on the road is linked to other criminal activity, and how any such links might be exploited.

The socio-demographic characteristics, criminal histories, current offending patterns and reconvictions of serious traffic offenders were examined using two existing data sources: the Home Office Offenders Index (OI)\(^1\) and a national self-report survey of Young People and Crime (YPAC)\(^2\). Interviews were also carried out with 132 traffic police officers in three forces to investigate the policing of serious traffic incidents.

Three main groups of serious traffic offenders were delineated: drink drivers, dangerous drivers and disqualified drivers. Comparisons were made with mainstream criminal offenders (convicted of violence against the person, burglary, robbery, theft and handling, criminal damage, and drug offences) and car thieves (theft of or from a vehicle). The YPAC also included data on driving without a licence or insurance, and failing to stop or report an accident.

Main findings

Gender

The OI showed serious traffic offending was predominantly a male activity. Females were involved far less than they were in other kinds of offending. Among those convicted of mainstream offences, 13% were female compared to less than 8% for drink drivers, below 3% for disqualified drivers and 5% for dangerous drivers. The YPAC survey provided further support to this finding with 42% of young males and only 15% of young females (16-25 years) admitting to ever committing a traffic offence.

Age

Serious traffic offenders had a similar age profile to mainstream offenders, with the exception of drink drivers. The OI showed 48% of drink drivers were 33 years or older. Approximately 72% of disqualified and dangerous drivers were between the ages of 18 and 32, in comparison to 64% of mainstream offenders. The highest age-specific conviction rates for drink driving and disqualified driving were between 21 and 25 years. For dangerous driving and mainstream offending the peak rates were earlier – between 18 and 20 years. By age 21 to 25 the YPAC showed that nearly 50% of males and 17% of females reported committing a traffic offence, the most common offence being driving without a licence or insurance.

Ethnicity

Figure 1: Serious traffic offending by ethnic group and gender: young people aged 16-25

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\(^1\) Two samples were drawn from the OI totaling 42,861 offenders – all offenders convicted in the first 15 days of March 1996 and the first 15 days of November 1996.

The YPAC data showed the prevalence of traffic offending was higher for young white people than for other ethnic groups. Figure 1 shows that 44% of young white males admitted ever committing a serious traffic offence in comparison to 29% of young Pakistani males and less for other ethnic groups. Sixteen percent of young white females admitted ever having committed a serious traffic offence compared to 10% of young black females and even less for the other ethnic groups studied. A similar differential was found after access to a vehicle had been taken into account.

**Social factors**

The YPAC showed that generally there was not a strong relationship between socio-economic group and overall rates of serious traffic offending for either males or females. However, males in the highest social groups were much more likely to report drink driving (in the last year the rate was double that of other social groups) whereas males in the lowest social groups were more likely to admit ever committing licence and insurance offences. Factors such as peer group, family and school, which correlate strongly with mainstream offending, were also found to be related to serious traffic offending among young people, both for males and females.

**Current convictions**

Forty percent of the OI sample were convicted of more than one offence at their current court appearance. The three types of serious traffic offence showed different patterns in the extent to which they were intertwined with other kinds of offending. Only 12% of drink drivers were convicted of secondary offences in comparison to 46% of disqualified drivers and 51% of dangerous drivers. Mainstream offenders (45%) and car thieves (53%) showed similar numbers with secondary offences. However, serious traffic offenders were commonly charged with summary motoring offences, which accounted for one in three of their secondary offence convictions. Fifteen percent of dangerous drivers and disqualified drivers were also convicted of a mainstream offence at the current court appearance, and 18% of car thieves were convicted of a serious traffic offence.

**Past offending**

Sixty-five percent of the OI sample had one or more previous convictions at the time of their current offence. For serious traffic offenders the percentage with previous convictions was:

- 40% of drink drivers;
- 78% of disqualified drivers; and
- 52% of dangerous drivers.

This compared with 70% of mainstream offenders with a previous conviction. These figures necessarily omit previous serious traffic offences, as they were not included in the long-term OI data. The most common previous conviction for all offender groups was a mainstream offence, and there was little evidence of specialisation in type of offence, although over 50% of disqualified drivers had a previous conviction for car theft.

**Table 1: Offenders with previous convictions: incidence of previous criminality, by offender group**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offender groups</th>
<th>Incidence indicators</th>
<th>Dangerous drivers</th>
<th>Drink drivers</th>
<th>Disqualified drivers</th>
<th>Car thieves</th>
<th>Other offenders</th>
<th>Mainstream offenders</th>
<th>All cases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of previous court appearances</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of previous convictions</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% convicted before 16 years</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>48.4%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>40.5%</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean number of months since last court appearance</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>101.3</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among offenders with previous convictions, drink drivers were found to have a lower incidence of offending (see Table 1). They had half as many previous convictions as other offender groups, and their last court appearance was on average eight years ago in comparison to an overall average of three years. Nonetheless, drink drivers were estimated to be twice as likely to have a criminal record as a member of the general population of the same age and gender (this estimate is based on data for persons aged 21 to 32, for whom data is available on the prevalence of offending in the general population).

**Recent convictions**

Recent convictions were assessed over a ten-month period when previous serious traffic offences were included in the records (the three offences were only included in the OI at the start of 1996). Thirty-one percent of the November 1996 OI sample had been convicted of an offence over the previous ten months. Drink drivers were the least likely to have a conviction (7%), followed by dangerous drivers (20%). Forty-six percent of disqualified drivers had a recent conviction, compared to 33% of mainstream offenders. Mainstream offences were again the most common, but there was some degree of specialisation. Among offenders with previous convictions over the ten-month period, 52% of disqualified drivers had recent serious traffic offence convictions and 47% of car thieves had recent convictions for car theft.

**Subsequent convictions**

Subsequent convictions were assessed over a twelve-month period using the March 1996 OI sample. Nearly 34% of the sample were reconvicted in that following year. Drink drivers were least likely to be reconvicted (12%) compared with 27% of dangerous drivers, 37% of disqualified drivers and 50% of car thieves. The most common reconviction was a mainstream offence. For serious traffic offenders, 29% of all reconvictions were

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3 The OI sample was based on two cohorts of offenders convicted in the first 15 days of March 1996 and November 1996. These convictions are termed as the ‘current’ convictions.
for further serious traffic offences (mainly disqualified driving) and 8% were for car theft. The results show that there was some specialisation in repeat serious traffic offences, but within a context of generalised patterns of offending in criminal histories.

Young people and self-reports of offending

The YPAC survey showed a clear positive association between serious traffic offending and mainstream offending – 57% of males who admitted traffic offences in the last year also reported current mainstream offending. This compared with only 21% for those reporting no current traffic offending. For females, drug use was as an important factor as mainstream offending in its association with serious traffic offending. However, for males, mainstream offending was twice as important as an indicator of serious traffic offending. The links with mainstream crime and drug use also differ between types of serious traffic offence. For males, drink driving offences were more closely related to drug use than to mainstream offending, whereas licence and insurance offending was linked to mainstream crime but not drug use.

Policing traffic incidents

The interviews with police officers focused on four types of incident – involving drink driving, disqualified driving, dangerous driving and criminal offending. Drink driving was the most frequently dealt with incident type, and dangerous driving was the least common. In 50% of crime incidents the main offences dealt with were neither traffic nor vehicle related, but were mainstream crime and drug offences.

Sixty-two percent of incidents involved more than a single offence. Drink driving incidents were less likely to involve further offences (41%) in comparison to 75% of disqualified driving incidents. Minor traffic offences were the most common secondary offence. Nearly 20% of disqualified driving incidents and dangerous driving incidents involved further serious traffic offences and 15% involved mainstream crime. These findings mirror those based on the OI; this suggests that groups of offences dealt with together in court generally arise from a single traffic incident (rather than from other events).

A study of the origins of the incidents showed that approximately 50% of drink driving incidents arose through routine patrol often involving observation of the offender’s behaviour. Nearly 40% resulted from ‘reactive’ policing – attending an accident or responding to calls from the public. Routine stops also accounted for 52% of disqualified driving incidents with prior intelligence or information a key factor in 31% of cases. Dangerous driving incidents arose in a number of ways – attending an accident, directly observed, complaints from the public or radioed through for action. Forty two percent of crime incidents resulted from routine and speeding stops.

Journey to crime

The distance that offenders had travelled was often short; 55% were less than ten miles from home, and in only a quarter of cases was the distance more than 30 miles. Criminal offenders were as likely to be ‘local’ as serious traffic offenders.

Profiling serious traffic offenders

Offenders were separated into three groups (disqualified drivers, dangerous drivers and drink drivers) for most of this study, based simply on the ‘current’ conviction or incident. The profile of the three main groups can be summarised as follows:

1. **Drink drivers** had less extensive criminal records than other groups of serious traffic offenders – only 40% had a criminal record at the time of their current offence, the average time since their last court appearance was eight years and only 12% had a subsequent conviction within a year.

2. **Disqualified drivers** showed a similar offending profile to mainstream criminal offenders. Seventy nine percent had a criminal record (72% for mainstream offenders), their levels of previous offending were slightly higher than for mainstream offenders and they were equally likely to be convicted again within a year (37% were reconvicted).

3. **Approximately 50% of dangerous drivers** had a previous conviction and some 25% were reconvicted within a year. Dangerous drivers may be a more varied group of offenders than other serious traffic offenders; about 30% have a previous conviction for car theft, and this group have similar criminal histories to disqualified drivers. Those without any involvement with car theft show more similarity to drink drivers.

The evidence shows that serious traffic offenders cannot be thought of simply as otherwise law-abiding members of the public. Even drink drivers (who are the least involved in mainstream crime) are estimated to be twice as likely to have a criminal record as members of the general population. However, it is also clear that traffic offenders are by no means a unitary group. The current findings are largely consistent with the 1967 discussion by Steer and Carr-Hill, who (in a re-analysis of Willett’s 1964 data) suggested a distinction between two main groups, based on type of offence: ‘dishonest offenders’ (driving while disqualified and driving without a licence or insurance) and ‘driving offenders’ (drink driving, dangerous driving and failing to stop or report an accident)4.

Points for action

The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) emphasised the need for local action to address both public safety and crime reduction – the two key features of road policing. The findings of this report highlight the potential for an intelligence-led approach to disrupting mainstream crime through targeting serious traffic offenders. The use of intelligence derived from road policing could impact on both traffic and other crime reduction. A number of implications have been drawn from this study:

- The findings can be used to profile (albeit crudely) serious traffic offenders which could guide and focus effort when devising strategies and initiatives to target offenders or offending behaviour. The low incidence of females and young black males committing serious traffic offences should be taken into consideration when targeting offenders.

- Targeting serious traffic offenders could be used as a tool to help disrupt mainstream crime, as certain groups of these offenders are highly likely to commit mainstream offences.

- Traffic officers have a dual role in the detection of both traffic and mainstream criminal offences. This role could be enhanced further through the use of intelligence derived from both road user crime and mainstream crime.

- There is a very close association between disqualified driving and other kinds of offending, and this link should be exploited. Intelligence could be used to a greater degree in the enforcement of this offence.

- The flow of intelligence between traffic officers and other uniformed/CID officers could be improved, as it is likely that intelligence from road policing could impact on other policing and vice versa.

- Data quality is crucial to the role of traffic officers and improvements to links and accessibility of data sources such as PNC and DVLA could be considered.

“The views expressed in this briefing note are those of the author, not necessarily those of the Home Office (nor do they reflect Government policy).”

Copies of the full report are available from: Home Office, CDU(RDS), Room 201, 50 Queen Anne’s Gate, London SW1H 9AT. Facsimile no. 020 7222 0211.

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