A national survey: Why do drivers fail to stop and report an accident? Interim findings

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Research background and context

This research briefing presents the key findings from a national postal survey of drivers with current endorsements for failing to stop or report road traffic accidents[ii]. The survey was conducted between September and December 2015 and is part of an ongoing study that aims to understand:

1. Why some drivers fail to stop/report an accident (which includes offences often colloquially referred to as 'hit-and-run');
2. The preventative strategies that could be implemented to reduce the number of offences.

Nationally, Department for Transport (DfT) data highlight that in 2014, of the 163,554 road traffic accidents where an injury was sustained, in just over 10% a 'hit-and-run' driver was involved[iii]. Although the level of seriousness of accidents in relation to fail to stop/report offences can vary significantly, there are potentially several negative consequences. While the most severe accidents might lead to death or serious physical injury, there are also potentially long-term and emotional impacts on both victims and their families, and also financial implications. While the total costs of hit-and-run accidents are unknown, in 2014 the cost of a road accident with a fatality was estimated to be in the region of £2m; a serious injury accident £200k and a slight injury accident £24k[iv]. If one considers that, in 2014, there were 78 *fatal*, 1,569 *serious* and 15,382 *slight* hit-and-run accidents, the potential overall costs to the economy are likely to be significant.

Despite the obvious consequences of 'hit-and-run', there is a relative paucity of policy or academic based research that identifies driver motivations or develops preventative strategies[v]. A primary aim of the national survey was to engage with a sample of drivers with endorsements for fail to stop/report road traffic offences and to understand:

1. The reasons for leaving the scene of an accident;
2. How drivers are traced after the accident;
3. Factors that would make drivers report an accident.

A postal survey was sent to 19,071 drivers*[vi]*. Initial analysis of the sample frame revealed that 81% were male, around a quarter were aged 34 or under and 75% also had a current endorsement on their record for offences that could indicate poor driving behaviours[vii]. In

total, 695 'useable' responses were received[viii]. Of these, 77% of respondents were male and 23% female: 27% of respondents were under the age of 34.

Key findings

A total of 99% (n=688) of the sample group were able to give some detail about the accident that led to them receiving an endorsement. The majority were driving a car at the time of the accident (85%; n=587) and in 77% (n= 523) of cases another vehicle was hit. In 9% (n=62) of cases a pedestrian was hit and in 11% (n= 78), respondents said they did not hit any other object[ix].

Reasons for leaving the scene of an accident

The reasons why drivers left the scene of an accident are presented in Table 1. The two right hand columns present the proportion of responses as a percentage of those respondents who stated at least one reason for leaving the scene (n=518) and also the proportion of responses as a percentage of the total survey sample (n=695). The most common reasons for not stopping/reporting are because drivers:

- Did not think the accident was serious enough to report or they did not think it had to be reported (50 to 66%);
- They were scared about what might happen to them as a consequence of the accident (17 to 23%);
- There was not any damage to a vehicle (16 to 22%).

Table 1: Reasons given for leaving the scene of the accident

	Total (% of sample group stating reasons)*	Total (% of survey sample)
Didn't think it was serious enough	38	29
Didn't think it needed to be reported	28	21
As the accident was my fault, I was scared about what might happen to me	23	17
No damage to vehicles	22	16
I had been drinking	17	13
Other drivers were aggressive	11	8
Other driver hurt so I panicked	7	5
I was not insured	5	4
Other pedestrians were aggressive	4	**3**

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A pedestrian was hurt so I panicked	2	**2**
Not involved in accident	2	**2**
Base (number of respondents)	**518**	**695**

*% will not add to 100 as multiple responses could be made.

These findings indicate that many respondents viewed the accident as trivial. However, the data do point to some potentially more serious reasons for leaving the scene. For example:

- The driver had been drinking (13 to 17% of cases);
- Other drivers or pedestrians were being aggressive (11 to 15%);
- The driver 'panicked' (7 to 9% of cases);
- The driver was not insured (4 to 5%).

DVLA data indicate that although only 27% of drivers are aged 16-34, this group constitute 54% of the population that are convicted for fail to stop/report offences. Therefore, further analyses explored differences by age. Table 2 outlines reasons for leaving the scene for drivers aged 16-34 compared to those aged over 34. Here some statistically significant differences emerge:

- Those drivers aged 16-34 are more likely to flee the scene because they are scared of the consequences, they had been drinking, had no insurance or they 'panicked'.
- Older drivers are more likely to leave the scene if they did not think the accident was serious enough to report.

Table 2: Reasons given for leaving the scene of the accident by age group

	16- 34 age group (% of sample group stating reasons)*	Over 34 age group(% of sample group stating reasons)	% point difference	Statistical Sig**
As the accident was my fault , I was scared about what might happen to me	33	11	-22	.000
I had been drinking	19	10	-9	.005
I was not insured	10	1	-9	.000
Other driver hurt so I panicked	11	3	-8	.000
Other drivers aggressive	11	7	-4	ns
A pedestrian was hurt so I panicked	3	1	-2	ns
Other pedestrians were aggressive	3	3	0	ns

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No damage to vehicles	14	17	3	ns
Didn't think it needed to be reported	17	22	5	ns
Not involved in accident	1	8	7	ns
Didn't think it was serious enough	22	31	9	.05
Base *number of respondents/% of sample)*	*148/29%*	*357/ 71%*	505/100%	

*% will not add to 100 as multiple responses could be made. **chi squared test

Some further analysis of the reasons for leaving the scene was conducted in relation to whether another vehicle or a pedestrian was hit. It was observed that in cases involving a pedestrian, drivers were more likely to say they panicked or that other pedestrians/drivers were being aggressive towards them. For example, of the 62 observed accidents involving pedestrians:

- In 13% of cases drivers said they 'panicked' so fled the scene (as compared to 6% in other types of cases).
- In 27% of cases drivers said they faced aggression from pedestrians/other drivers and so fled the scene (as compared to 10% in other cases)[x].

How drivers are traced after leaving the scene

Of course, a key challenge in convicting drivers for hit-and-run offences is (a) establishing the identity of the vehicle and (b) the identity of the driver. Table 3 identifies how drivers said they were eventually caught after the accident. In summary:

- In the majority of cases drivers were traced by a pedestrian or another driver noting down the registration number of their vehicle (54 to 64%);
- In over 1 in 10 cases, drivers reported themselves to the police;
- In just under one in ten cases, drivers are identified via CCTV.

Surprisingly, in 11 to 13% of cases drivers did not know how they were traced after the accident.

Table 3: How drivers were traced after leaving the scene of an accident

	Total (% of those stating reason)*	Total (% of survey sample)
Pedestrian/other driver took registration number	64	54
Don't know	13	11
I reported to police	12	10

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Caught on CCTV	9	8
Driver/pedestrian followed me	7	6
Base (number of respondents)	*585*	*695*

*% will not add to 100 as multiple responses could be made.

Further analysis was conducted to identify if differences emerge in the way drivers are traced in accidents where pedestrians are involved. In such accidents drivers are:

- Less likely to be followed by another driver. This happened in 2% of accidents involving a pedestrian compared to 7% of all other cases;
- Less likely to be captured on CCTV. This happened in 3% of accidents involving pedestrians as compared to 8% of all other cases;
- More likely to eventually report it themselves to the police. This happened in 19% of all cases involving a pedestrian as compared to 10% of all other cases[xi].

Factors that would make drivers report an accident

Respondents were also asked to state what factors might have made them report the accident immediately after it happened (Table 4). In summary the four main reasons were:

- If it was known an offence had been committed (45 to 56%);
- If a pedestrian had been hurt (38 to 47%);
- If there was damage to another vehicle (32 to 40%);
- If it had been known penalty points would be received (19 to 24%).

Table 4: Factors that would make drivers stop/report an accident immediately after it happened

	Total (% of those stating reason)*	Total (% of survey sample)
If known committed offence	56	45
If pedestrian had been hurt	47	38
If there was damage to another vehicle	40	32
If known I would receive penalty points	24	19
If known I'd been seen by witness/recorded on CCTV	14	11
None, I was determined to get away with it.	3	3

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If tougher sentence for this offence	3	2
Base (number of respondents)	**558**	**695**

% will not add to 100 as multiple responses could be made.

Interestingly, further analysis revealed little difference in the findings according to whether a pedestrian was involved in the accident or not. However, some statistically significant differences did emerge in the responses when analysed by age group:

- Older drivers (those over 34) said they would be more likely to stop/report if they had known they had committed an offence (50% compared to 36%: sig 0.007);
- Younger drivers were more likely to suggest they would stop/report if they knew a pedestrian was hurt (46% compared to 37%: sig 0.004);
- Worryingly, 6% of younger drivers said that nothing would have made them stop as they were determined to get away with the offence (6% compared to 1%: sig 0.001).

Implications and future research

These findings need to be treated with some caution as the sample only represents around 4% of drivers with current endorsements for fail to stop/report offences. That said, some potentially important issues emerge:

1. The majority of drivers with current endorsements for 'failing to stop/report' (AC10/20) offences also have endorsements for offences that indicate poor driving. Therefore, there is a known cohort of drivers nationally who might benefit from greater awareness of the potential legal, human and financial consequences of their driving and possibly also from further driver training/instruction.
2. Most offenders who 'fail to stop/report', leave the scene of an accident as they do not think the accident is serious enough to report or do not realise that there is a legal requirement to report. Such drivers might benefit from being made aware of the legal obligation to report accidents.
3. Many younger drivers in particular leave the scene as they are not insured or they have been drinking. Reducing the numbers of young drivers who drink and the number driving without insurance would logically reduce the number of 'fail to stop/report' AC10/20 offences recorded.
4. Offenders who fail to stop/report, are most commonly traced as a result of pedestrians and other drivers taking details of registration numbers. This suggests the public and other drivers play an important role in tracing drivers who fail to report/stop after an accident.

Further research could usefully explore these findings with larger samples of drivers or in relation to accidents where the most serious damage is caused/injuries received. Indeed,

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there is evidence from this study that in cases where pedestrians are involved many drivers flee the scene as they are not thinking rationally and that they 'panic'. Therefore, a focus on such cases and identification of potential preventative strategies might be a welcome addition to the paucity of research.

Media enquiries

MIB (www.mib.org.uk) aims to significantly reduce the level and impact of uninsured driving by working closely with partners across government and the insurance industry. The Bureau provides compensation to innocent victims involved in accidents with drivers who have no insurance or failed to stop.

For media enquiries about MIB and how it works to compensate the victims of uninsured and untraced drivers please contact the MIB press office at: pressoffice@mib.org.uk.

Further MIB media contact information can be found at: www.mib.org.uk/media-centre.

An ISDN line is available for MIB interviews.

University of Leicester enquiries

For enquiries about this research conducted by the University of Leicester, please contact Dr Matt Hopkins: mh330@le.ac.uk.

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[ii] These are offences recorded as failure to stop after an accident (code AC10); failing to give particulars or to report an accident within 24 hours (code AC20); undefined accident offences (code AC30) and wilful failure to carry out the obligation placed on drivers after being involved in a road accident (code MR19).

[iii] Around 4% of all fatal driving accidents involve a 'hit-and-run' driver, as do 7% of those with a serious injury and 11% with a slight injury. Source: data supplied by Department for Transport.

[iv] See Department for Transport (2015) - Average value of prevention per reported casualty and per reported road accident: Great Britain, latest available year. The methodology for the costings valuations can be found at Department for Transport (2015) - https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254720/rrcgb-valuation-methodology.pdf

[v] Some research has been conducted, though studies tend to be based on police data and are concerned with the characteristics of the environment and are often only concerned with fatal incidents. Research on the motivations for 'hit-and-run' is limited.

[vi] We would like to thank the DVLA who sent out the survey and collated the responses.

[vii] Such as careless driving, drink driving, speed limit offences and reckless/dangerous driving.

[viii] It should be noted that these drivers were not necessarily to blame for the accident – they were convicted for a fail to stop or report offence.

[ix] In seven cases multiple objects were hit, these included vehicle/building (in six cases) and vehicle/pedestrian (in one case).

[x] In both cases (panicked and aggressive behaviour) data were statistically significant at the .000 level.

[xi] This is statistically significant: sig 0.016