

Think you're better at driving than most? How psychological biases are keeping our roads unsafe

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You never have to look hard to find recent reports of fatal vehicle crashes on UK roads. After [devastating events](#) such as a crash in West

Yorkshire in July 2024, where four adults and two children were killed, media reports often focus on the need for better law enforcement and driver education.

Safety campaigns can only work if people think the messaging is relevant to them and choose to change their behavior. But [psychological research](#) shows that many people [are overconfident](#) in their driving abilities and think it's "normal" to drive recklessly and break road laws.

The number of people who are killed or seriously injured on UK roads has stayed reasonably static since 2012. Five people are killed and around 80 are seriously injured [every day](#). Imagine the [public outcry](#) if the [homicide rate](#) reached this level. It seems that there is a level of social acceptance around the inevitability of road death which feeds into driver attitudes about "acceptable law breaking" while driving.

Researchers call people's tendency to normalize dangerous driving practices at a societal level [motonormativity](#). This is an [unconscious bias](#) where people are more accepting of the risks associated with driving than other activities. [A 2023 UK study](#) found 61% of people agreed that risk is "a natural part of driving" compared with only 31% who agreed when the word "driving" was changed to "working."

This normalization of driving risk feeds into attitudes about breaking the rules of the road. UK government statistics from 2022 show that [50% of drivers](#) broke the speed limit on a sample of 30mph roads. The roadside breakdown group RAC's 2023 [annual report](#) on motoring showed that [25% of drivers admitted](#) to regular, illegal phone use.

It's easy to assume that this is due to people not truly understanding the risks of such behavior, but the report also showed 95% of drivers agreed that people who talk on handheld mobile phones while driving are putting others' lives at risk.

Motonormativity might explain why some people feel that new road safety measures are really an attempt to make money from the public, rather than grounded in safety. The default 20mph speed limit introduced in Wales in 2023 has been [widely opposed](#).

This is [despite evidence](#) the new speed limit has improved safety, with the number of recorded collisions on these roads decreasing by 17% since the change was implemented. The [introduction of seatbelt laws](#) in 1983 initially provoked a similar negative response.

These sorts of biases also influence driver attitudes and behavior, including a tendency for most drivers to consider themselves to have [above average skill](#). This inflated confidence isn't necessarily tied to [increased skill or experience](#), as even novice drivers demonstrate this self-enhancement bias.

Most drivers also underestimate their chances of being [involved in a collision](#), due to their belief that they have increased skill. And each time a driver breaks the law without any apparent consequence, they confirm their view that they are above average and that laws can be "safely" broken. This is known as confirmation bias.

These biases help to explain why motorists show strong support for driving laws, [despite breaking such laws themselves](#). They believe the rules should be enforced for other, less competent, drivers. The poor standard of other motorists' driving and other drivers breaking traffic laws are consistently rated as a concern for UK drivers, while [research shows](#) that people who lack self-awareness about their driving tend to be poorer drivers.

The combination of these biases leaves us in a difficult situation. We have unacceptable rates of road death and harm caused by excessive speed, distraction and impairment from alcohol and drugs. But most

drivers don't think their behavior is part of the problem. This is compounded [by research showing that](#) drivers who speed or use their phones are often unaware of their deteriorated driving performance.

So how can we change driver behavior?

Traditional approaches aimed at changing behavior can actually strengthen driver biases. Safety campaigns which use [pictures and videos of other drivers' crashes](#) to shock, or cause an emotional response, lack impact as many drivers simply don't believe it will happen to them. Campaigns aimed at shaming drivers into complying with the law (for example, "friends will judge you for speeding") don't work when driving offenses are normalized as "not real crime" because ["everyone does it"](#).

Headlines such as ["Man killed by lorry"](#) distance the driver from accountability and support the notion that traffic collisions are inevitable. Likewise, using the word "accident" to describe crashes, suggests they are unavoidable. In reality, speeding, drink or drug driving, phone use and not wearing a seatbelt—all of which are avoidable—are the [leading causes of road deaths](#).

We [need a balance](#) of education, policy and enforcement to change behavior.

Campaigns could [directly address](#) self-enhancement bias without damaging driver ego, by telling people that even really good drivers crash.

In May 2024, Labor MP Kim Leadbeater introduced a graduated licensing bill to parliament that could include a zero-alcohol limit for new drivers and control the number of passengers young drivers can carry during a probationary period after passing their test. [Evidence-based](#) changes to laws and policies such as this that reject the notion that

road harms are inevitable could meaningfully reduce road deaths and injuries.

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