

Victims of circumstance

The losers who kill ordinary motorists often believe that *they* are the real victims





THOMAS IS AN ALCOHOLIC. Thomas sees things a bit differently to most people. Every one of his stories of disaster start with the innocent phrase: "I was just having a few drinks, when" .

As far as Thomas is concerned, what follows next is some unfortunate occurrence that he is not really responsible for, especially as he usually doesn't remember.

In one such incident Thomas was just having a few drinks, then, by some freak series of events that he can't completely remember, he ended up being chased down a motorway by the police, even after his tyres shredded and he had collided with a motorway barrier. He then fought with the police as they tried to drag him from the car and handcuff him. Later on, in the cellblock, he was beaten by police.

When Thomas tells the story, the getting drunk, driving recklessly and fighting is just background to the real outrage, which was when the police beat him up. We don't think that the police should have beaten him up.



But the scariest thing is Thomas's near-total inability to accept any responsibility for what occurred.

The highly regarded road safety researcher John Bailey once investigated hundreds of road accidents and came up with a profile of the person most likely to be involved in a fatal car accident - he's a young working class male with substance abuse problems and a close association with the criminal community. By the time he kills somebody or himself he is quite likely to have a string of prior criminal convictions. He is also likely to be driving an unsafe and illegal car at the time of accident.

Bailey's profile is depressingly accurate in many cases. Take the case of Bevan Shane Marino, a South Auckland gang associate who killed two German tourists and two of the passengers in his car while drunk and on cannabis. His own 3-year old son, who was not wearing a seatbelt, was thrown through the windscreen of the car.

As Marino was driving erratically and at high speed, his bald left rear tyre punctured and he lost control, killing the people described above and injuring two others.

Marino allegedly told the police after the accident: "yeah, I was pissed, mate. I don't remember...none of it."

Marino told the police that he had gotten the car from a gang headquarters three weeks earlier and had never checked the tyres, one of which was worn right through the steel casing inside.

Most people get very angry when they read of accidents like this one, in which the grossly irresponsible actions of a driver causes the deaths and injuries of so many innocent people. However, before we get carried away by an understandable desire for revenge, let's take a cold, hard look at the situation.



Most governments are trying to lower the road toll: education and enforcement, especially targeting speeding by ordinary motorists.

As soon as you look at either of the two examples described above, it becomes immediately obvious that neither the education nor enforcement campaigns would have had any effect whatsoever on the outcome of the accident described above. The police (through no fault of their own) in both cases could only act after the substance-abusing driver was already behind the wheel and headed for trouble. Both drivers could have had one million dollars worth of speeding tickets and no licence and they would still have got behind the wheel. The driver in both cases was incapable of making any sort of reasoned judgement and in both cases the fact that he would likely end up dead or in prison would have had little or no effect on either driver's actions at the time the offences were taking place.

Therefore, for the hard core of criminal drivers – a group highly likely to end up dead or causing death – the current road safety policies are a complete and expensive waste of time.

There are things that can be done about lowering the road toll but most of these are discussed in our other safety articles. For now, it's important to focus on the reality of the situation and not become distracted by anger.

Those who end up dead

There are three groups that tend to die road accidents:

The first group is **old people** generally, because their reaction times, eyesight and hearing are all impaired with age, and they are also very likely to be driving a smaller vehicle and are far more likely to be fatally injured in an accident than a younger person.



This group does not generally fit the criminal profile, unless they are also habitual substance abusers.

The second group is young people generally, but especially working-class males aged around 15-24 and especially those with criminal convictions. Members of this group that end up dead are often also members of the third group: habitual substance abusers.

Members of this group may be any age and will range from the teenage alcohol/cannabis/barbiturate user (a bad combination) to the elderly rural male who's been driving home after a few drinks for the last forty years and sees no harm in his actions. At the worst end of the scale, habitual substance abusers tend to repeat their mistakes over and over again. They drink-drive and lose their licence. They drive drunk while disqualified and go to prison. They get out and drink-drive and then kill someone. They go to prison, then get out and drink-drive and then kill someone else.

Part of the package deal that often goes with criminal substance abuse by young men is speeding. Excessive speed is dangerous at the best of times, but it's a lethal combination when combined with inattention caused by fatigue and/or substance abuse. It's also worth noting that there is strong anecdotal evidence that the people most likely to be using substances of abuse are also quite likely to be fatigued. Fatigue, substance abuse and speeding are a particularly lethal combination.

The habitual substance abuser who's been driving home after a few drinks for the last forty years generally sees no harm in his or her actions. In reality members of this group are probably alcoholics or borderline alcoholics, even though they may appear to function well on a daily basis.



The bottom line is that they have grown strongly used to having a few drinks at the end of a hard day, and even though they do not see themselves as addicts they would have great difficulty changing their lifestyle. Because they see no harm in what they do, they are largely immune to shock-horror road safety advertisements. Amazingly, they tend to see themselves as safe, law-abiding drivers. They know that there are cops out there but they tend to see the police as spoilers of innocent fun. Even if there was an alternative way of getting to the pub than taking their own vehicles, they would probably choose to take their own vehicles anyway, because of convenience and comfort.

This type of offender will often drive for years without hitting anything major, which proves to him that he is a safe driver, then one day that nasty combination of circumstances which make up fatal accidents will occur. For example, it might be the first wet night after a long dry spell. He's been at the pub an hour longer than usual because it's darts night. His car has a bald tyre. He loses attention on a bend and when he corrects he goes into a skid and the last thing he remembers is the headlights of the family that he killed.

The news media shows pictures of the mangled wreckage, opposition politicians cry out for revenge, the courts send him to prison for manslaughter, and then the whole matter is quickly forgotten, except by the families concerned.

Those who abuse

It's important to understand why people behave the way they do, not to excuse them, but so that society can take the appropriate steps to protect itself from them.



Like a significant percentage of people in prison, severe habitual substance abusers tend to fit into three categories: those who offend due to environmental factors, those who offend due to psychological factors and those who offend due to a combination of both environmental and psychological factors.

Environmental factors

If you grow up among violent criminals and substance abusers, then you are very likely to grow up to be a violent substance abuser. It's not hard to work out – as infants we look to our parents to tell us how to live, and if our parents are violent & messy then chances are that we will grow up to be violent & messy too. Not always, but highly likely. What's worse is that as the children of substance abusing/criminal parents grow up, they get into trouble and get sent to institutions where they are most likely to be living among the children of substance abusing/criminal parents. Most of them never realise that there is any other way of living.

It's also important to remember that you can't separate a fish from the sea and you can't entirely separate a substance abuser from a society that all-but worships substance abuse. If you look at the cold, hard statistics on alcohol-related deaths and social problems in the West, it's immediately clear that alcohol is a far more dangerous drug than heroin, cocaine, speed and cannabis put together, yet alcohol is also almost totally socially acceptable.

Every year hundreds of billions are made from pushing heroin and hundreds of billions are made from pushing alcohol. Strangely, however, our society locks up heroin dealers but gives brewers knighthoods.



Movies like *Casablanca* and pretty much every Hollywood film since have portrayed alcohol use as normal and often sophisticated, with drunks frequently portrayed as amusing and somewhat innocent.

Although people have to take some responsibility for their actions, we can't simply get upset when a person's drinking causes a problem – in this culture it's an unusual person who doesn't have easy access to alcohol and easy access to people who will approve of drinking.

To quote Aldous Huxley: "Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor, and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul."

For many people alcohol is the happy end to every bad day and the club or pub is their haven from life's difficulties. Habitual alcohol users almost without exception seriously underestimate the amount they drink & how much it affects both their ability to function and their general health. They are commonly either physically and/or psychologically addicted or well on the way to addiction. An integral part of this process is a complete denial of any problems associated with their drinking.

The test for whether or not a person has a problem with alcohol is a simple one: could they comfortably exist if they removed alcohol from their life?



If we were talking about heroin use in Asia, everyone would get very self-righteous and say how terrible it was and start blaming the poverty and the pushers, but somehow where alcohol is involved the West is in complete denial.

If a high enough percentage of people in our society who drink regularly, then it is mathematically inevitable that a percentage of them are going to have serious problems with it, and this percentage is far higher than is immediately obvious. Inevitably, the people at the bottom of the social heap are most at risk.

Town planners require pubs to have large carparks and yet governments get upset when people drink and drive. Governments run a token few ads telling us to drink in moderation while thousands of billboards and millions of other ads tell us the exact opposite. Does that strike anyone as odd? There are those who argue that whether or not we drink, and whether or not we abuse alcohol are matters of personal choice, although in this culture a person who doesn't habitually drink is likely to be a very lonely individual swimming against an alcoholic tide. We predict, however, that if breweries were fined one million dollars for every person who drove drunk after consuming their alcohol, then the problem of alcohol abuse would drop away substantially overnight.

The cycle continues

When habitual alcohol abusers raise children, they often raise children who grow up thinking of alcohol abuse as being normal. It's incredibly sad that the same children who cringe in their bedrooms as their drunken parents fight it out in the kitchen are highly likely to grow up and repeat their parents' behaviour.



Also, when children are raised in an environment with a high acceptance of alcohol use & abuse, these children are highly likely to react to difficult circumstances (such as the divorce of their parents) by abusing alcohol. It might take a few years, but the pattern is firmly in place. It's like an open can of petrol, waiting for someone or something to ignite it.

Few people come from perfect backgrounds and most of us don't end up as criminal substance abusers, either through good genetics, good luck or good management. Some children, however, are not so lucky. You can make a pretty strong argument for simply removing vulnerable children from the homes of violent criminals and substance abusers and placing them in (ideally) a caring family, or failing that, a caring institution.

Once they reach adulthood, however, then the only four options are:

- 1) Do nothing and hope.
- 2) Arrest criminal abusers when they commit offences, imprison them for serious breaches then let them out without treatment and wait for them to re-offend
- 3) Lock them up and throw away the key once they become a problem, or
- 4) Place them in an environment where they learn a different way of thinking and living.

The last option rarely happens and there is a high treatment failure rate anyway. As a result, while you read this there are probably dozens or hundreds of substance-affected criminals driving on roads near you. If the cops notice and chase them, then a fatal crash involving innocent people is highly likely. If they lose control near you, then you'd better hope you're protected by luck, good road engineering or a safe car.



Psychological factors

Criminal substance abusers often have significant mental problems brought on by neglect or abuse and these problems are magnified many times by the very substances they take to dull the pain of existence. Sadly, therefore, the people most likely to be negatively affected by alcohol, cannabis and other drugs like speed are the very people most likely to take them.

Childhood trauma may also result in psychological problems and therefore substance abuse later in life. For example, if a child is sexually or physically abused, then his or her chances of becoming an alcoholic or drug addict are much higher. Profound abuse – especially over an extended period of time – leaves children feeling powerless and angry. If some form of counselling or support is not given, then trouble is highly probable.

Not only is alcoholism or another form of drug addiction a likely outcome, but it is also highly likely that such people will enter abusive relationships and indulge in self-destructive behaviour such as suicide, possibly while driving a car.

Current research suggests that certain children have a genetic predisposition to antisocial behaviour if there is profound trauma and/or abuse during childhood. This goes a long way to explain why two children from the same violent, criminal background can have totally different outcomes. Many researchers believe that even with the predisposition towards antisocial behaviour, children can grow up to lead productive, happy lives if either the childhood is peaceful or if there is positive intervention. This intervention can take the form of removing a violent parent from the child's environment, removing the child from a traumatic or abusive environment, counselling or a combination of these measures.



It's therefore sad that governments can find money to build new prisons, but can't find money to keep kids out of prisons. If there's no positive intervention, then the outcome for both the individual and society is pretty grim.

Those who lose and those who stray

It is important to understand the difference between challenging behaviour, antisocial behaviour and criminal behaviour. The reason the human race no longer lives in caves is that young people, especially young males, challenge their parents and indulge in experimental, risky behaviour.

If the young person is emotionally stable and comes from a caring family, then most of the experimental, risky behaviour will be symbolic. Every parent of a teenager knows the battles over things like what is appropriate clothing and whether or not a tattoo is a good idea.

Teenagers know that they are not the same as their parents, yet they often don't have a clue as to who they actually are, so they experiment with different identities and lifestyles, and they will do so whether the parents agree or not. Most of these battles revolve around a teenagers' need to feel they have some control over their lives. Freedom is a big issue for this group.

Well-raised kids have road accidents too, but unless simple bad luck is involved, such as being hit by a drunk driver or being in someone else's car that has an accident, most accidents among this group are caused by the general messiness that is characteristic of the late teen – early adult years. This group live life at full throttle, trying to juggle study, relationships and socialising and they are quite likely to be experimentally using alcohol or other drugs as part of their social life.



There is a profound difference between accidents that occur to mainstream young adults and those from criminal/substance abusing backgrounds.

Regardless of the social class they are from, young adults make mistakes. That's a simple fact, and they often immediately regret that mistake and take steps to make sure that this mistake is not repeated. They may wake up the next morning in horror at the realisation of what they have done. Even if their behaviour was incredibly stupid, they probably had no criminal intent and acted stupidly because they did not realise the likely outcome of their actions.

Statistically this group is least likely to offend again and may be model citizens for the rest of their lives. Putting them in prison is probably a pointless exercise that has more to do with society's need for revenge than it does with stopping irresponsible behaviour.

There is also a group that gets into a great deal of trouble over a few months or years during late adolescence and then never offend again. It's worth being patient with the members of this group because they tend to be angry and confused, but this stage will pass and they will be the wiser for it.

On the other hand, if the young substance abuser/criminal has a serious accident, he is highly likely to repeat the experience many times. This is the group that is by far the highest risk to both themselves and the world at large, for three terrible reasons:

- 1) They often view their behaviour as reasonable and normal.*
- 2) They do not really understand cause and effect and therefore won't take responsibility for their actions. When describing an accident to their cellmate in prison, they won't say: "I drove when I was drunk and therefore I killed someone."*



Instead, they will say something like: "I was drunk and I killed someone." In their mind there is no real connection between being drunk and killing someone. The deadly accident was a freak occurrence, as far as he or she's concerned.

If this seems hard to believe, imagine that you went out for a walk and it suddenly rained. You don't feel responsible for the rain, it wasn't your fault or anything you could reasonably be expected to take responsibility for. Well, that's how the habitual substance abuser feels about both his drunkenness and its ghastly results.

3) *They often believe themselves to be victims.* Incredible though it may seem, they wake up in a police cell after killing someone in a car the night before and they feel profoundly sorry that they have been arrested and will probably go to jail.

The dead people they left behind somehow don't seriously enter the equation. It wasn't really their fault because they were too drunk to realise what they were doing, and being blotto is a perfectly normal and reasonable way to go through life.

Safer roads (e.g., with barriers down the middle to stop head-on collisions) and safer cars are just about the only things that society can do to protect itself against a habitual substance abuser, although police from time to time target repeat offenders and grab them the next time they get behind the wheel but before they actually drive.

The main way to stop habitual offenders, however, requires money, understanding & patience – three things in very short supply these days. However, if we are really serious about getting drunk drivers off the road, we need to head them off before they get there •

