

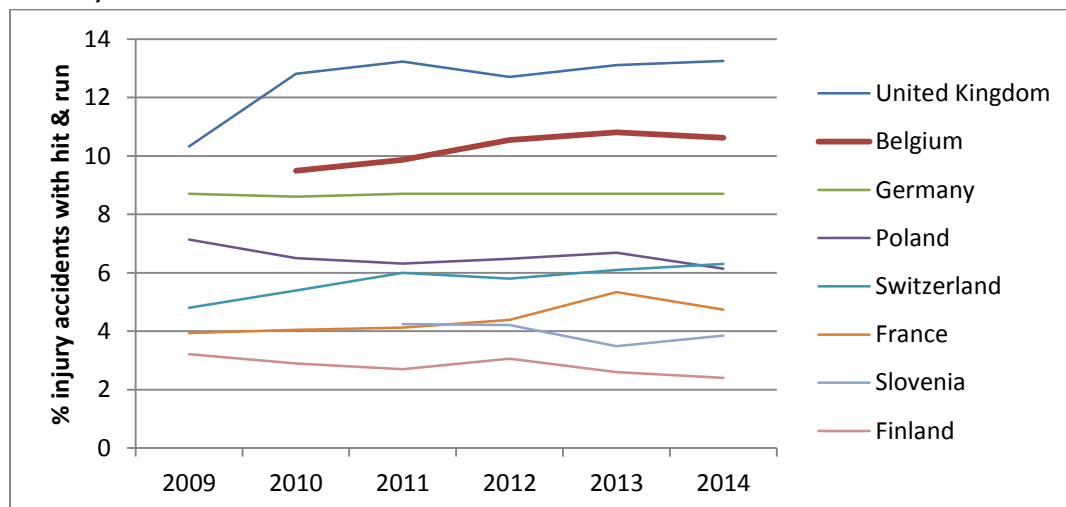
Beyond shame and guilt: *What's inside a hit and run accident*



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Hit and run accidents are a phenomenon often discussed in the press. Because accidents with shock value (e.g. a hit and run) are more likely to be reported in the press, the impression of how often drivers escape from an accident might be exaggerated. Unfortunately, they are indeed common on our roads. In Belgium, nearly 10% of all accidents with injuries are hit and run accidents (recorded by the police). While for fatal accidents, the percentage is much lower (only one out of 25 was a hit and run), the Belgian share of hit and run accidents among fatal accidents is also one of the highest in Europe (Martensen, H. & Kluppels, L. 2016).

Figure 1: Percentage of hit & run of all injury accidents in European countries 2009 - 2014. Source National statistics/CARE



In most cases, even a fatal accident is considered as the coinciding of several mistakes, poor skills or wrong decisions. When a severe offence (drunk driving, speeding, etc....) has caused the accident, not only public opinion, but also the law take this as severe misbehavior. A hit and run accident on the other hand, is classified as a real crime which can lead to severe punishment. In Belgium, judges can sentence you with an imprisonment of up to two years, a fine of up to €30,000 and a driving ban for three months or more (possibly for the rest of your life). Apparently, the possible deterrence effect of these sentences does not prevent some people from running away from what they have caused.

For victims or their relatives a hit and run accident causes triple grief. Like in any other accident there is a lot of grief about the real damage, injury or fatality. It not only concerns the direct consequences, but also the impact on the rest of their lives. Sometimes a simple accident can change the whole life

of the victim and/or his relatives. Secondly, in the case of hit and run, the further handling of the situation (financial compensation, accident analysis, court procedures, etc.) takes much more time. There seems to be real suffering before everything can be settled. But the most painful aspect by far is the uncertainty about what has happened and why a person left the victim to his fate. Also the fact that someone failed to take responsibility for his actions is probably the most horrible aspect.

What turns a driver into a hit-and-runner?

In some ways, running away could be seen as a normal reaction (Geller, S. 2010). People are strongly motivated to avoid negative consequences. Probably all of us can remember such an event during childhood when we had done something wrong and pretended to ‘know nothing’. Such avoidance actions are usually moderated by a person’s upbringing and culture. We learn about values like honesty, taking responsibility and accepting a moral code about how to deal with others.

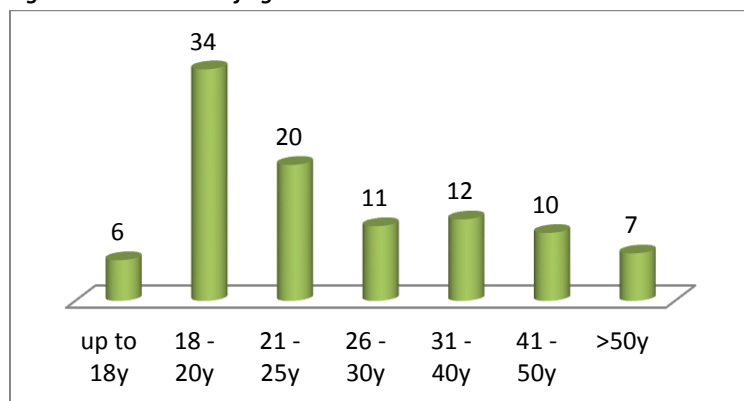
This could lead to the conclusion that hit-and-runners are people with no moral sense or with a sociopathic personality. According to Farley (Reyna & Farley, 2006), it’s likely that there isn’t one “ironclad personality profile proven in science’. The psychological reality is always more complex than we want it to be. Unfortunately, there are not many studies that can give us an idea of the causes and motives concerning hit and run accidents, partly because a lot of these drivers are never caught. So, our conclusions could only be partial, based on those who were caught or those who turned themselves in.

Over the past 20 years, the Belgian Road Safety Institute has been giving Driver Improvement courses (DI) as alternative punishment for traffic offenders. 800 offenders have been to these courses because of a hit and run. Of course this is not a representative sample of all hit-and-runners. First of all, it concerns only those who were caught, and secondly those people who got a conditional sentence, namely a DI course. This paper is based on the explanation that this group gave throughout the courses.

Description of the group

Of the 853 offenders, the majority were young males; only 14% were female drivers. More than 50% of these drivers were 25 or younger at the time of their offence. (see figure 1)

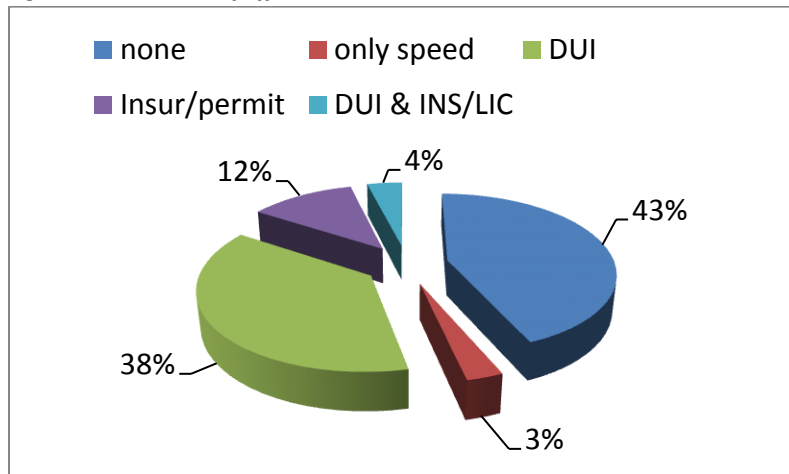
Figure 2: distribution of age



Most of the accidents (74%) in which the driver committed a hit and run offence are accidents with material damage only to another car or to another object (tree, fence, and so on). In 11% of these accidents, another person was injured and 1% were fatal. We had no further information in about one accident in seven,.

In 42% of these accidents (figure 3) the driver was under the influence of alcohol and/or other illicit drugs. The paperwork of 16% of the drivers was not in order (license or insurance). In 43% of the cases there was no other offence mentioned by the police. It was, however, often noticed that in those cases the police had not been able to test the condition of the driver.

Figure 3: distribution of offences behind the hit and run accident



A flood of emotions

In the vast majority of stories a flood of emotions, including fear, shame and guilt best describes the moment and the first seconds after the impact. This is actually the case in any accident, not only hit and run events. No driver has the intention to damage things or to injure other people while driving. He wants to get somewhere, and it must be fast, secure, comfortable and smooth. Because handling the car is (semi-)automatic behavior, most drivers are not anxious or alarmed. Certainly in easy going traffic, the general feeling is more relaxed. Whatever the reason, a sudden event that leads to an accident is always very disturbing. The situation changes from contentment into threat. The bigger the possible consequences, the stronger the fear. And with fear comes shame (“what are other people going to think of me?”, “I am not the person that could do such things!”, “Am I a bad driver?”). Guilt is a very nasty feeling; especially when the consequences of the act are enormous. A strong feeling of guilt can lead to denial, or to blaming the victim (“what was he doing here at this time of day!”, “It’s not my fault, there was nothing I could have done”).

In general, most people have enough self-control to handle these emotions and to act in a responsible way. They try to solve the situation by helping the victim and to restore the damage as much as possible, in spite of the possibly ongoing discussion about ‘who is really responsible for the accident’. In some cases, however, the flood of emotions overwhelm the self-control capacities and the driver runs away. [drives away?]

Psychologists (Wachtel, 2014) call this a ‘flight or fight’ instinct. The thinking part of the brain (frontal cortex) shuts off and leaves only two alternatives ‘go away-flight’, or ‘attack the threat’! In such state

of mind running is probably the best reaction. This 'breakdown' takes only a second before sensible reasoning comes back.

What causes failure in regaining logic?

Alcohol and drugs make the influence of emotions stronger and rational decision-making more difficult. This is one of the reasons why alcohol intoxication is far more present in hit and run accidents. Broughton (Broughton, J. 2004) estimates that the number of intoxicated drivers in hit and run accidents is twice as high compared to non-hit and run accidents. Also, different studies in the US found that drunk driving was associated with hit and run accidents (MacLeod et al., 2012 / Kim, K. et al, 2008 / French, M. & Gumus, G., 2015). An earlier study in the Netherlands found out that in 60% of hit and run accidents the driver was under the influence of alcohol (Holleman, 1970 / Jong, 1980) In our course population at least 38% was driving under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs when causing the accident.

The influence of alcohol extends the duration of the emotional flood, so the motivation to escape gains importance and strength. The decision to leave or stay must be taken in a split second. Such decisions are made on the basis of only a few aspects, which looks the most important, etc. The study in the UK also gives evidence that this kind of influence already works with lower BAC levels.

Intoxication from alcohol and drugs does not only disturb our logical thinking, but in itself forms a reason to flee. Driving while intoxicated is a severe offence. In Belgium, not only the punishment for causing an accident by a drunk driver is high, but insurance companies also have the option to withdraw their intervention, at least partly¹. The consequences for the driver are very severe, and this frightens him. So fear of the punishment can be very overwhelming, especially when there the driver has the idea that he can get away with it. The possibility of being caught afterwards and getting a more severe punishment because of the hit and run, is far away in his mind and has a connotation of 'unlikely'. The possible consequences of staying and being punished for drunk driving is more likely.

The latter reasoning can also occur for other severe offences like uninsured driving or driving without a license. Also in these cases the immediate consequences are great and motivate the driver to run away in hoping he will never be caught. In our group, the share of this motivation was however not very large. Only 16% of the hit-and-runners was not in order with these administrative obligations. Most of them were young drivers with a prohibition to drive during weekend nights, or were too young to drive a car. The older offenders who had no insurance and/or license had already committed other (traffic) offences and sometimes drove during their withdrawal period. There is evidence that older uninsured drivers are frequently involved in other offences, and also have a high recidivism rate (Blom & Wartna, 2004 / Blom et al., 2011). This could indicate that for these persons, not only the fear of punishment is a motivation to flee, but that they have a more general tendency to disobey the law.

Consequences must not always be understood as financial or judicial. Some people are more concerned with their image and social position. Especially people who have a certain public function

¹ In fact, only when the judge convicts a driver for drunkenness, can the insurance company recover (part of) the indemnification from the driver..

(managers, police officers, VIPs and celebrities) are very sensitive to these matters. Doing something wrong, such as drinking or driving without a valid license, or being with someone they aren't supposed to be, is a negative reason for being in the newspapers, or on the pin-up board at the office. They want to avoid blame. This was the reason why Armstrong initially said that his girlfriend was guilty of the hit and run accident² and why a police officer³ let his son take the blame for the accident.

Once the decision has been made (based on fear of punishment, blame or on basis of denial of guilt) it is not so easy to undo this decision. Further reasoning and actions have the tendency to justify the previous one. Even when emotions cool down, the human mind always tries to gain some justification for itself. Festinger (Festinger, L., 1957) has developed a concept around this phenomenon, namely 'cognitive dissonance'. He states that people seek consistency between their expectations and reality. In order to avoid dissonance between our idea of what's right and what we have been doing, it is often easier to change our ideas than our actions.

That's also the reason why only a few people return to the place, or turn themselves in. After a certain overwhelming period, their moral code (responsibility, integrity, etc.) and their courage take over from emotions and self-protection. Sometimes this is only possible when a close relation intervenes in a positive way.

The role of actual conditions

In the split-second decision, one of the important issues is the perceived probability to get away with it. That's why more hit and run accidents take place in poor lighting conditions, on more deserted roads or when no one else is around (MacLeod, 2012 / Tay et al. , 2009). All these conditions could strengthen the idea that nobody has seen what has happened and that nobody could identify the driver.

Some authors (like de Jong) link the time period in which hit and run accidents are more frequent with the use of alcohol and hereby explain the higher frequency during nighttime and early hours of morning and not for the reason of the impossibility of identification.

In minor accidents with only material damage, the damaged object can also play a role in the decision whether the driver should flee or not. In the discussion with our participants there were two frequently mentioned aspects.

First of all, who is the owner of the object? If they had hit a tree, a traffic sign or something else that is government owned or when the owner is not a real person, some people don't even know they have to compensate the damage. How can you pay a tree or a riverbank? The bill they get afterwards always seems too exaggerated or is only meant to enrich the government.

Secondly, when the object hit is considered private property, limited damage could also encourage the flight. ("It's only a mirror, so what's the problem?"). "Last month, someone did it to me, so now it's my turn").

² <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2015/feb/19/lance-armstrong-fined-over-aspen-collision-where-girlfriend-took-blame>

³

Although these actual conditions could have an encouraging influence, human and behavioral factors play a more important role (Kim et al.). It's always a decision that is taken and that could be influenced by several emotions and circumstances, but it is nevertheless a decision..

Sometimes people argue that they were not aware that they had caused an accident. It is possible, in particular with trucks (Grassberger, R., 1977) that in some circumstances the driver was not aware of the collision. When a cyclist is hit by the last section of a long trailer, it is possible that the truck driver didn't 'feel' the collision and that he keeps driving without noticing the cyclist behind him. More common is the damage by these trucks on parked cars. But nevertheless, these kind of situations are exceptional (Broughton, 2004). If a driver of a light vehicle (van or passenger car) does not notice his collision, there are other elements involved like alcohol or drowsiness or is this just an excuse?

Lack of moral judgment

For a small group of offenders, it is not the fear or the overwhelming flood of mixed emotions that leads to an inappropriate decision, but there is more likely a lack of emotion. These people have another moral code. For Clements (Clements, P., 2013) most of the hit and run drivers suffer from a lack of good moral judgment.

In my experience, based on the DI courses, this group is rather small, although almost every offender tries to justify his decision with arguments that do not demonstrate high ethical insights. The real 'rational' hit and runners, can be divided in two types: the 'gambler' and the 'asshole'.

The *gambler*, also described by Farley, is someone who likes to take risks. He is self-confident and energetic and enjoys playing with the limits. He feels in control and thinks he could reach the sky. To flee from an accident is more a challenge for him ("how high is the risk of being caught?"). He's challenging fate. It seems he doesn't care about what other people say or whatever the consequences may be.

The *asshole* is a more rational person who simply doesn't care about other people. He is selfish and has his own rules. He is convinced that accidents are the fault of the victims, who are too stupid to properly react to his driving style. Leaving the scene is a better idea than being unfairly punished. He lacks empathy with others and is only interested in what effects himself.

Where the first one, in general, loses his gambling behaviour and his light-hearted way of life the moment he becomes a parent, there is not much hope that the asshole will change his egocentric lifestyle, whatever he experiences.

Can we prevent hit and run accidents?

Hit and run accidents with injuries or fatalities are the most horrible crimes in road safety because of the severe amount of grief and the obstruction it causes for the normal judicial process. This is why most people demand severe punishment for these acts. And indeed, a hit and run offence should have a higher penalty than causing an accident and staying at the scene, even when this accident was caused by alcohol intoxication or any other severe offence. We should not create a perverse effect that drivers who are under the influence of alcohol or drugs flee a crash scene due to severe DUI

sanctions, which are more stringent than non-DUI hit and run sanctions. This was the case in a few states of the US (French, 2015).

On the other hand, we don't have to be too optimistic about the deterrence effect of high sanctions. In several studies (Swov, 2013 / Kahneman, 2011/ Tierolf, 2009) the effect of the severity of the sanction only has a very small impact on the prevalence of offences. The possibility of getting caught is more important than the severity of the sanction.

It is not always easy to catch a hit and run offender. Forensic scientist can recover a lot of information from small pieces of a vehicle (trademark, model, colour and so on) but first of all you need to have such a piece and secondly it can indicate a car model, but not the exact vehicle, nor the driver. The real probability of getting caught for a hit and run accident varies between 30 and 50%, depending on the severity of the accident involved (Holleman). But the deterrence effect does not depend on the real possibility of getting caught, but on the perceived possibility. This can be more easily raised by publicity campaigns on solved cases.

Cozijn (Cozijn, C. 1985) also points to another perverse effect in our legislation. An insurance company offers a reduction if the driver has not been involved in an accident the previous year. In general, this is a good incentive to stimulate safe driving behavior. But on the other hand, it could also be a motivation to flee the crash scene.

In fact, a specific strategy to prevent hit and run offences is not possible. We must focus on the issues that lay behind the motivations to flee.

While driving under the influence and uninsured driving are very common in hit-and-run accidents, we must make more effort to tackle these offences. Here, police control, adapted and swift legal reactions, must go hand-in-hand with specific campaigns.

Traffic education (also in schools) should not only focus on traffic rules and insight into traffic situations, but also on moral codes, citizenship and caring about others. Being aware of the possible grief of victims and their need to know what really happened can have an enormous impact. (Cuenen, a. et al 2014)

Conclusion

Hit and run accidents are caused by a mix of emotions, like fear, shame and guilt. The 'normal' reaction to avoid these situations is overruled by our human capacity to take responsibility and to care about others. Alcohol can influence our decision because it makes it more difficult to control our mind, but also because we want to hide the fact that we drive in an intoxicated state. Other illegal acts can also influence the decision to stay. The stronger our moral values, the easier it is to overrule our emotions and to take responsibility. By focussing more on these values in traffic education, we can minimize the number of hit-and-runs. In addition, regulations and sanctions could have an influence, especially by focussing on the prevention of DUI and uninsured driving.

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