

# A risky business

Driving in pursuit of criminals at high speeds can put great demands on police officers and put themselves and the public in danger. Psychologist and driver training expert Dr Lisa Dorn writes about how to cut the risks



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**In pursuit:** driving at speeds can put officers and the public at risk

Officers have a difficult role to play in minimising risk to the public and controlling crime. The activity that presents the greatest challenge in balancing these two requirements is when an officer is behind the wheel of a vehicle. Figures from the Independent Police Complaints Commission show that in the financial year from 2008 to 2009 more than half, 22 out of 40 civilian fatalities following police related road traffic incidents, were connected to pursuits. Driving also represents the greatest risk to officers themselves, both on and off duty. A more robust pursuit policy is in development but a new look at how officers are being trained to drive to cope with their demanding role on today's roads is also critical.

Police driving schools are facing an impossible task. There is increasing pressure to deliver courses as effectively and efficiently as possible with fewer resources. Instructors are doing all they can to prepare officers for operational driving, but worry about skill fade and whether trainees have the right attitude for safe driving. There simply is not enough

time to ensure an officer is aware of all the risks they might face over the course of their career. Students may drive to the required standard within the training environment but still become involved in crashes post-course. IPCC research shows that these crashes are often not due to poor vehicle handling skills, rather, attitudinal and behavioural factors.

## Police officers are human too

Drivers have an increased risk of being involved in a crash when they are impaired or distracted. It's well known that fatigue, stress, ill-health, medication and legal and illegal substances can impair drivers to dangerous levels. In-car systems, police radio, road and traffic events, the nature of the call and stressful life events will distract officers from the primary task of driving safely. No amount of training in the physical skills of driving will mean a driver can resist these human frailties. So why do we expect that officers can somehow cope with the pressure of driving fully kitted vehicles whilst trying to respond safely in a critical situation? Expecting officers to possess superhuman qualities is unrealistic. We all make mistakes, and if any form of risk is involved when executing police duty, those mistakes can be deadly.

There have been relatively few fundamental changes to police driver training for decades, despite major developments in driver behaviour research. It is time that new more efficient and evidence-based educational methods are introduced to supplement police driver training courses. These new methods would not only improve key skills, but also enable instructors to focus on their expert skills; the development of fundamental driving skills.

## Cranfield Research

Our investigation into police driver behaviour began over ten years ago at Cranfield with a Home Office funded project. Hundreds of police drivers and instructors from more than 30 forces have taken part in our studies. Our analysis has led to several peer-reviewed publications, and the following represents a brief outline of the main findings and ongoing work.



Photography: Alamy

## Brain training can produce safer drivers

### Psychometrics and police driver behaviour

A number of human factors can impact on the way an officer drives. Some police officers may be vulnerable to driver stress, may lose attention, or miscalculate risks for a whole range of reasons. Facets of thoughts and feelings impact on their driving performance and can lead to poor decision-making (Dorn, 2005). Many officers state that their training and experience makes them relatively invulnerable to being involved in a crash (Dorn and Brown, 2003). This kind of overconfidence in driving abilities and unrealistic expectations may mean that officers will be willing to put themselves or the public in danger in the belief that their advanced skills will get them out of trouble.

To identify these kinds of beliefs, an online psychometric assessment (the Police Driver Risk Index: PDRI) has been created profiling the way a police driver thinks, feels and drives. The PDRI provides a standardised and objective way of measuring emotional, motivational and attitudinal characteristics in approaches to police driving. Over 1,000 officers have taken part and studies have shown that the PDRI can correctly identify police drivers with safer driving records.

This instrument is used to address attitudes through an individual profile completed at the beginning of a driver training course. The instructor can then direct attention towards specific areas for self-improvement using coaching skills to address unsafe beliefs during the course. The PDRI is completed again post-training to ensure that the required standards are reached.

### Cognitive and visual skills in police driving

The ability to identify situations that might require some form of avoiding action is an essential skill in police driving. A wide visual search enables early detection of priority hazards, particularly when on response or in pursuit. Experienced police drivers learn to select the most relevant information and focus on the most important tasks.

Recently, driver education research has shown that brain training accelerates learning for inexperienced drivers by developing the frontal lobes of the brain used when perceiving risk, scanning for hazards and making decisions about what to do next.

A high fidelity video-based tool has been developed for driver brain training. This presents synchronised footage of the forward view, dashboard, and accurately timed side and rear mirror images. This tool has produced documented changes in the judgment centres of the brain, leading to changes in the way drivers anticipate and react (Isler et al, 2009). Film clips of real world traffic and driving scenarios are presented and drivers respond to a multitude of different roads under different conditions. Participants are asked questions such as 'what happens next?' The answers are easy if officers are paying full attention, scan the scene and anticipate hazards. Key visual and cognitive skills are built using audio and visual feedback about where to focus attention. This approach is currently being used by thousands of drivers, and is now being applied to improve police driver safety in the US.

### Improved training in key skills

We now know enough about driver behaviour and how the brain processes information to develop 21st Century driver training tools. These methods are cheap and easily administered and can be incorporated into regular refresher training as well. Over-emphasis on vehicle handling skills in training can leave some drivers with the belief that they possess superior driving abilities. Psychometric profiling provides an objective method of assessing these beliefs. Innovative evidence-based methods such as these will protect and support officers by ensuring they are fully equipped for the task in hand for the most dangerous component of their working day.

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