

Don't get so close - I hardly even know you

Call a man (or his wife) anything you like... runs the proverb, but never, ever, call them a bad driver. Well, such drivers might soon be in for perfectly valid name calling - probably at the roadside - for some new and equally valid reasons. Advanced technology is delivering detailed statistics, updated second by second, from sensors on the A361 North Devon Link road, ensuring that the Department for Transport-funded Devon Country Mile Partnership teams now know where quite a few bad drivers are - and when...

One of the most consistent findings revealed by new data from this innovative project is that traffic speeds are often above relevant speed limits - sometimes well above - while drivers simultaneously indulge in dangerously close following. This brings a major risk of "shunt" type accidents where minimal reaction and braking time following any kind of incident results in an unavoidable collision between consecutive vehicles in a traffic stream, triggering a 'domino' effect sometimes involving dozens of vehicles. The phenomena, long known as tailgating, has been around for years - but the new A361 data has again prompted an age-old question: why do so many - but not all - drivers and motorcycle riders, travelling at speed, get too close to the vehicle ahead? The experts are unanimous: its entirely foolhardy, with absolutely no benefits whatsoever, while the most well qualified and experienced drivers in the land, Traffic Police and civilian Advanced Drivers groups alike, are crystal clear: tailgating is downright dangerous.

Experts can cite disadvantages ranging from the blindingly-obvious-except-to-tailgaters-themselves through to the thought provoking. The hugely increased risk of hitting the vehicle in front on sudden braking, and much restricted forward vision lowering the chances of anticipating and reacting to happenings ahead are hardly at the cutting edge of driving theory, but are risks ignored by many. Perhaps less obvious, except to the more considerate motorist, is the effect on drivers behind a determinedly tailgating vehicle: on busy single carriageway roads tiny gaps make it frustratingly difficult for vehicles behind to overtake. This leads to a queue with more tiny gaps, making overtaking still more difficult. This brings increased stress levels - and tailgated drivers could feel threatened, doing something unexpected that will be regretted later... by several drivers in a now stationary, and slightly crumpled, traffic queue.

Tailgating is not only undesirable - its unnecessary. Effecting a cure for the tendency brings a healthy bonus: it'll prevent Devon and Cornwall Police and the region's Safety Camera Partnership adding points to your licence or extracting fines from your wallet. Mike Hull, Community Driving Instructor on the Devon Country Mile Project, offers these tips: "Start by disciplining yourself to leave more space in front of your car in every moving traffic queue. You'll immediately get a better view of road ahead, and more time to react to sudden braking - as well as more and safer overtaking opportunities. Give anyone who tailgates your car maximum room and opportunity to overtake, freeing space you can claim for yourself. And observe the golden rule: keep your distance by always allowing a gap between your vehicle and the one ahead of at least 2 seconds - at 60mph thats 176 ft or almost 54 metres, actually a surprisingly long way..."

Some sensors on the A361 are consistently showing over 80% of cars travelling at up to 60mph are separated by less than two seconds. Other data shows shunt-type incidents accounting for at least 40% of all injury collisions involving cars, while police statistics routinely indicate close following and sudden braking amongst the top five contributory factors where injuries are involved. Such statistics, accurately revealed for the first time, are greatly and understandably concerning those responsible for safety on one of the region's most heavily trafficked roads.

Devon Drivers' Centre Training Manager Martyn Gould, a trainer qualified to the highest advanced levels, is in no doubt about the inherent risks and dangers: "The Highway Code stopping distance from 60mph, 240 feet or about 73 metres - in ideal, dry conditions - should be regarded as the absolute minimum," he says. "Go inside that, or the 2 second rule, and you're contravening the fundamental laws of physics... You will hardly even react in less time than this - and you just will not be able to stop if something happens ahead."

A whole new background to safety issues is steadily being revealed through interpretation of previously unavailable data as this multi-agency project progresses. Its thus hardly surprising that enforcement efforts are being both significantly increased and more accurately targeted than ever before - as the Devon and Cornwall Safety Camera partnership and the region's road Policing Unit work to both rein in excessive speeds, and generally improve driver behaviour in the Country Mile project area.

As Martyn Gould says: "Railways get involved in shunts... not safe, intelligent drivers..."