

# Harassment, Aggression, Violence and Road Safety from a Criminological Perspective

Laura Gómez García, Ph.D  
School of Law, Business and Government  
University of Francisco de Vitoria, Spain

## Abstract

Road violence is a major problem that does not yet have a universally accepted definition. It is important to consider violence in the context of the road in order to prevent it. Road criminology focuses on the study and prevention of traffic-related deviations and problems generated after an accident. There is a lack of general knowledge about the reality of crime in the road environment; the society is not aware that certain behaviours of harassment and aggression cause risky situations and fatal results. It is essential to address the problem, defining and delimiting it to combat it. Education is once again essential to prevent crime and to put an end to social permissiveness around unacceptable behaviour related to road safety.

**Keywords:** road harassment; road violence; road aggressiveness; road criminology.

## Introduction

Road safety is a major global issue, as millions of people die every year as a result of road accidents. According to WHO, around 1.35 million people die and between 20 and 50 million are injured or disabled each year due to road accidents. In addition, road traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among people aged 15 to 29 worldwide (WHO, 2018).

There are multiple causes that occur in road accidents in relation to the three factors that are interrelated: road factor, vehicle factor and human factor. In addition to the most frequently identified reasons such as inadequate road infrastructure such as lack of protective barriers, insufficient or poorly placed traffic signs and roads in poor condition (road factor), as well as the poor condition of the vehicle, either due to mechanical problems or inadequate maintenance (e.g. a worn tyre or a faulty brake system), defective vehicle design, which may cause problems of stability or visibility problems that may contribute to an accident (vehicle factor), other behaviours that cause accidents due to imprudent or reckless driving, such as speeding, drunk or drug driving, distraction (such as using the mobile phone while driving) and failure to follow traffic signs (WHO, 2018). Such conducts involve actions that could be identified as harassment, aggressiveness and road violence. Common actions on the part of road users which, in turn, are little known and criticised by society.

Despite the challenges, there are several steps that can be taken to improve road safety around the world. Road infrastructure is a key factor in road safety, as it can help reduce the risks of road accidents. One of the main measures to improve road infrastructure is the construction of protective barriers, such as middle and side barriers, that can help prevent collisions between vehicles and reduce the risk of serious injury in the event of an accident (WHO, 2018). But, of course, the factor on which all preventive efforts should be invested is the human factor. Two reports on road safety, one of which is 'Road Safety Issues, Efficient Driving, Environment and Pollution' (DGT, 2015), indicate that the main factor in road accidents is the human factor (90%), while the rest is due to other factors such as the vehicle and the road (10%). The report stressed the importance of drivers taking responsibility and taking preventive measures rather than blaming other factors. The text suggests that it is important to focus on the human causes of road accidents, particularly in relation to drug and alcohol use, speed, and the use of medicines. It is also mentioned that it is important to consider how many different factors may contribute to unsafe behaviour on the road and how this may increase the sense of insecurity in society; behaviour that may well be identified as bullying assault and road violence. It stresses the need to focus road safety on the human factor as it is the cause of most road accidents (between 70 and 90%), while the rest are caused by the vehicle (4-13%). It is important to invest in driver training to improve road safety, as expertise and knowledge of road rules are the two pillars brought by the human factor. The text suggests that driver training should include the acquisition of positive knowledge, skills, and attitudes, as these are the key to reducing accidents and their consequences. The lack of road safety education and awareness is a major problem, as many drivers are not well informed about traffic laws and best safety practices, as well as the lack of road safety education programmes in schools and publicity campaigns to make people conscious among drivers also contribute to this problem (WHO, 2018).

### **Criminology And Road Safety**

Road safety is addressed in general and specially for road safety offences through the application of criminology as a science.

Criminology plays a crucial role in road safety by developing effective criminal policies to prevent and reduce criminal behaviour and/or road crime, thus contributing to social well-being. Criminological analysis of the complex interactions of the road systems will help to better understand the dimension of crime and its impact on society.

The study of inappropriate traffic behaviour will provide the necessary measures to resolve conflicts before and after an accident, providing a multidisciplinary approach to road safety policies and promoting measures (legal, social, educational, economic, etc.) adapted to current realities and responding to road crime. The use of roads, which involves a social interaction composed of a network of elements operating in different

public settings, makes it necessary to consider road insecurity as a factor present in the absence of safety.

Criminology is also committed to a distinction and terminological application. It is important to note the distinction between the terms 'accidents' and 'claim' in relation to traffic. Traditionally, an accident refers to an event that occurs on a road or terrain regulated by traffic, circulation and road safety laws, resulting in the death or injury of persons and involving at least one moving vehicle. On the other hand, a fatal traffic accident refers to an accident with fatalities, while a serious traffic accident refers to an accident with injured victims requiring hospitalization for more than 24 hours. It is important to note that the use of the term 'accident' suggests chance or unintentionality, while the use of the term 'claim' suggests causality. Some statistics on deaths and injuries may be due to accidental and unavoidable causes, but research in this area shows that the most important causes are those that are causal and not accidental and fortuitous, which means that they need to be addressed and properly defined in order to be able to understand and, above all, prevent them.

Therefore, from the point of view of criminology, crime, deviant conduct, and risk behaviour in traffic are related as elements to interpret a part of the road phenomenology: origin, aetiology, development and variables present in road crime, in order to have an impact on components aimed at social control, penal measures and reintegration.

Consideration of the essential elements to be considered when implementing policies to improve road safety is fundamental and is the starting point for any study. In this sense, the MAPFRE Foundation, which is actively committed to improving road safety, is based on the following elements considered appropriate to achieve the goal of 'zero casualties': safe vehicles, safe roads, safe users, safe speeds and safe environments (Monclús & Jamarillo, 2015, page. 7 et seq.). Road harassment, aggressiveness and violence are also common behaviours in the interaction of the road system.

## **Road Harassment**

Road criminalization has evolved along with society. In a society obsessed with hate and stress, it is common to see drivers coming dangerously close to other vehicles, flashing their lights, honking their horns, and ignoring the safe distance. Such drivers will not stop until the vehicle they are harassing goes out of the lane, allowing them to escape. Another example is the driver who continues to criticize another for stopping at a STOP sign, accompanying his remarks with insults such as 'nobody's coming' or 'woman you had to be'.

It is worth mentioning here a type of victim that directly interferes with the conduct identified as road harassment. It should be noted that within the study of road

criminology and victimology, there is a classification of road victims that show that the victim of traffic is not the one who 'has had bad luck' or who participates as a passive element in the road network, but that there are different types in which the victim, for example, is guilty, thus sharing responsibility and guilt. Among those mentioned, it is worth naming the victim who is the one who encourages the perpetrator through acts of harassment on the road, until the victim commits the act that results in a traffic accident. In this case, the responsibility is divided between the two parties.

Like school, workplace and sexual harassment, there are other types bullying, which could be defined as the action taken by a road user who harasses and insistently demands another to take action against his will, causing problems for other road users. Bartolomé Vargas (2010), as a public prosecutor for road safety, understand road harassment as 'those circumstances in which the driver stands glued to another, with hostile gestures without leaving a safe distance or pressures another to increase speed'. This peculiar form of harassment can lead to life-threatening situations for those involved. Prosecutors prosecute road stalkers when their conduct can be considered reckless driving.

### **Road Aggressiveness**

Currently, there is no universally accepted definition of aggressiveness on the road. Some terms such as 'aggressive driving', 'road rage' or 'driving rage' are the ones that best approximate what is understood by aggressive driving behaviours (González González J. M., 2018). According to Quintanilla, William Martínez & Lobos Rivera (2017, p. 44), aggressiveness when driving is a form of violence that causes great harm. Although human force is used, is greatly enhanced by a vehicle. These authors point out that aggressive behaviour is an expression of the individual's personal characteristics, such as the release of frustrations, along with cultural habits related to learning reactions of anger, rage and aggression in traffic situations.

Aggression while driving is a frustration-driven pattern of behaviour, which manifests itself in reckless, annoying behaviours, honking horns, risky driving to save time and obstructing the road. According to Houston et al (2003), it is a dysfunctional pattern of social behaviours that poses a serious threat to public safety, which may include different aggressive behaviours such as honking, rude gestures and speeding that put the safety of other drivers at risk. Deffenbacher et al (2004), mentions that aggression is a behaviour intended to harm, intimidate, threaten or take revenge on another person or persons, and that, in the context of driving, the car is used as a tool. There are several factors that may contribute to aggressive driver behaviour, such as a perception growth, vehicle overcrowding, inadequate urban infrastructure to meet current demand and environmental factors (Sedano Jiménez, 2022).

Aggressive driving behaviour among young people is considered a risk syndrome, similar to other risk conducts such as smoking, alcohol and drug use, criminal behaviour, aggressiveness and violence. Despite this, few studies have addressed the relationship between road aggressiveness and accidents. (Alonso, Esteban, Calatayud, Montoro, & Alamar, 2004, page 155). A study conducted in Canada with a sample of 12.830 people showed that a third of the participants admitted to having shown signs of aggression at the wheel, which increased the risk of suffering a road accident by 78% when other drivers provoked or threatened other road users. The results showed a direct relationship between the presence of aggressive behaviours and the risk of collision, even equating the risk of collision due to the aggressiveness of other with that observed after substance use. It is concluded that working on reducing aggressive behaviours could have a direct impact on reducing the number of collisions. (Wickens, Mann, Lalomiteanu, & Stoduto, 2016).

To sum up, a study conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in 2016 found that road aggressiveness, along with other inappropriate conducts on the road, is responsible for more than a half of all the fatalities. In Spain, a study on the subject was carried out by the Institute of Alcohol and Drug Studies, from Valladolid Unit. (Fierro, Gómez- Talegón, & Álvarez, 2010). Its aim was to know the prevalence and sociodemographic factors motivating road aggressiveness. For this purpose, 2.500 interviews were conducted with Spanish-speaking Leonese aged between 14 and 70. The study found that road aggressiveness is common and frequent in society, stating that one in three people suffered road assaults and half of the participants admitted to having been both aggressors and victims. It is worth highlighting the proven fact that road aggressiveness is more prevalent among young men which increases the risk of suffering/inflicting a road accident, and preventive measures aimed specifically at this segment of the population should be reserved. Furthermore, there is a criminogenic relationship between the aggressiveness generated by the driver through the interaction with the vehicle and the users. Therefore, the promotion of informal social control, and training would make it possible to detect and blame this type of undesirable behaviour, which is present to a large extent as the cause of the accident rate.

## **Road Violence**

To understand the concept of road violence, it is necessary to analyse the meaning of both terms separately. Violence can be understood as the quality of something violent, an action that goes against the natural way of proceeding, and an action that is carried out with force and impetuosity. On the other hand, the term road refers to the driving of vehicles on roads and public streets. Together, road violence refers to violent and aggressive behaviour that is performed on the scene of driving vehicles on the roads.

The term road violence refers to the expression of anger or rage in a harmful behaviour towards other while driving with the subjective aim of causing harm. (Garrido Genovés y Gómez Piñana, 1998). The WHO (2020) defines violence as the intentional use of force or physical power, whether as an act or threat, against oneself or other, causing or with a high probability of causing injury, death, psychological harm, develop mental disorders or deprivation. However, it is also mentioned that, although an act may be considered dangerous by objective rules, the perpetrator may not perceive it as such.

Furthermore, WHO (2020) distinguishes between aggressiveness and violence: violence refers to the intentional use of physical force, threats, or other means to cause harm to oneself, others, a group or a community, which may result in injury, psychological problems, develop mental problems or even death. Aggressiveness, on the other hand, refers to an internal behaviour or attitude that may or may not manifest externally. Although the two definitions share similar elements, the difference is that aggressiveness refers to an internal psychological phenomenon, while violence refers to external consequences and the relationship between the two is unclear.

WHO devotes a specific space to the treatment and prevention of violence in general. Every year, more than 1.4 million people, lose their lives and thousands more are physically and psychologically injured, at a high cost to countries in terms of care, control, and the negative consequences of violence on all members of society. This is reflected in the World report on *violence and health*<sup>1</sup> (2017), establishing violence as a public health problem. In the first chapter of the report, defining and identifying elements relating to violence are developed, showing the possibility of prevention according to its characteristics and providing multifactorial responses targeted at all levels. The report also considers omission as a form of violence. Many of the deaths on the roads could have been avoided if the driver had not run away (failure to assist).

Road violence refers to acts or omissions that involve the use of force or anger against individuals or groups of persons in connection with traffic on public roads, which may cause or have the potential to cause injury, death, or other damage.

People affected by driving-related offences claim that road violence occurs in behaviours such as: abruptly and dangerously accelerating, threatening a possible collision between two vehicles, getting in and out of the road quickly blocking entrances and exits of motorways or major roads, excessive use of the horn, obscene hand gestures, verbal threats, physically attacking another vehicle with objects such as sticks or stones, physically fighting with or without weapons in connection with the road, and chasing for revenge on provocation.

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<sup>1</sup> World Report on violence and health.

In summary, although there is no unanimous and accepted definition of what constitutes road violence, it is important to recognize that there are unacceptable actions or omissions in traffic that must be addressed. It is necessary to draw attention to this problem to reduce its negative consequences and to bring it into the legal sphere. It is important to bear in mind that if the problems is not made visible, it cannot be adequately addressed. We need to be aware of the scale of road violence in order to combat it.

WHO has carried out several global campaigns to prevent different types of violence, such as child abuse, youth violence and sexual violence, but surprisingly it does not include road violence among its targets, being one of the leading causes of death worldwide. Although there is no commonly accepted definition of road violence, it is important to recognize it as a problem and to take steps to prevent it. Efforts must be focused on defining this problem, identifying its causes and risk factors to design affective preventive interventions.

## **Conclusion**

Risky behaviours generated by bullying, aggressiveness and road violence are directly related to road accidents. There is still no universally accepted definition of what road violence is. Although violence is dangerous in all its forms, road violence must be specifically considered and analysed in order to prevent it. It is a mistake to ignore or normalize unacceptable actions or omissions in traffic due to lack of legal or theoretical agreement. It is precisely social developments that make it necessary to introduce new definitions for specific behaviours in order to identify and prevent them.

Road criminology focuses on the study and prevention of traffic-related crimes, as well as the resolution of problems that arise after a traffic accident, involving both formal and informal mechanisms of social control.

There is a general lack of knowledge about the reality of deviant behaviour and road crime. Many people are unaware that certain driving conducts are criminal and that the consequences can lead to prison. Some people even openly admit to having committed road safety offences without being considered criminals without being considered criminals. In order to combat road crime, it is essential to address the problems, defining and delimiting it together with the elements and actors that characterize and are involved: the victims and the offenders. Again, education is a key element in preventing crime, ending social permissiveness around unacceptable behaviour also related to road safety, such as bullying, aggressiveness, and road violence.



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