

Adolescent Risk Research Unit

Rise, and shine.

Punishment avoidance and intentional risky driving behaviour: What are the implications for 'getting away with it'?

Scott-Parker, B., Watson, B., King, M.J., & Hyde, M.K. (2013)
Psychology of Punishment: New Research, Nicolas Castro (ed), pp. 55-77,
Nova Science Publishers Inc., New York



Why do this research?

Every motorised jurisdiction in the world states what behaviour is legal or illegal through road rules that are enforced by stakeholders such as the police.

Road rules and their enforcement have made substantial differences in road safety. For example, the introduction of seat belts and random breath testing in Australia have each achieved considerable reductions in the overall national fatality rate. However, as evidenced by police detected offences, wide spread violation of mandated driving rules still occurs. More importantly, there are many instances of illegal risky driving behaviours that are simply not detected by fixed or mobile police enforcement operations.

This research was designed to explore the implications of not being punished for intentional risky driving behaviour, such as speeding by young novice drivers.

What did we do?

In this case study 1,268 young drivers aged 17 to 26 years completed a paper survey one year after obtaining their Queensland provisional (intermediate) driver's licence.

What did we find?

23% of males and 12% of females reported they deliberately avoided on-road police presence.

23% of females and 20% of males reported they had been in a car crash in the previous 12 months. A larger proportion of police avoiders reported being involved in a crash (27% compared to 21% of non-avoiders).

33% of females and 35% of males reported being detected for a driving-related offence in the previous 12 months. 43% of avoiders reported having been detected for an offence compared to 24% of non-avoiders.

Police avoiders also reported much more risky driving behaviour compared to those who were not avoiders.

What does it mean?

Attempts at punishment avoidance have considerable influence on the risky behaviour of young drivers, and indeed this may be a stronger influence than actually experiencing punishment (e.g., a greater proportion of drivers who avoided the police reported more risky driving behaviours). Recent neurobiological evidence has revealed that punishment avoidance is processed by the same part of the brain in which rewards are processed. Considered together with the present findings, evidence therefore suggests that challenging the rewards associated with punishment avoidance is also necessary.