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Road crashes - UK's avoidable epidemic

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Road crashes are Britain's largest cause of premature death, with accidents statistics from the UK showing that half of all fatal collisions occur on just 10% of the country's road network. Some 10% of the UK's motorways and A category major roads have an unacceptably high risk according to the data, which comes from the annual road tracking survey carried out by the Road Safety Foundation. One-third of the UK's fatal and serious collisions occur at junctions: single carriageways are six times more dangerous than motorways and two times more dangerous than dual carriageways, while 1 in 7 primary roads is high risk compared to 1 in 33 non-primary.

The road with the highest number of fatalities in the UK is the A537, a short stretch of twisting road linking the towns of Macclesfield and Buxton. The A18 Ludborough-Laceby is the highest risk road (when motorcycles are excluded from the figures). Meanwhile the A40 from Llandovery-Carmarthen is the UK's most improved road, with junctions having been upgraded, new road markings introduced and extensive resurfacing carried out including anti-skid treatments. These have saved 20 fatal and serious collisions between 2006-2008: a 74% reduction and given the comparatively low cost of the measures, have been extremely cost-effective.

The A537 is a challenging stretch of road and is extremely popular with motorcyclists and performance car owners and at weekends is noted for the number of road users pushing their vehicles to (and beyond) the limit. The fact that the area is a major producer of quarried stone also plays a role as a high percentage of heavy tipper lorries also use the route and the accident statistics include numerous collisions. Fatal and serious collisions on this section have risen by 127% in the last 3 years rising from 15 in 2003-2005 to 34 in 2006-2008, with most crashes at weekends during the summer in dry, daylight conditions. Police records show that the vast majority of casualties were motorcyclists, from outside the local area, male, and with an average age of 35. Speed limits and some safety measures have been put in place while police enforcement can be notable at weekends, but the road remains a magnet for those willing to test their cornering and braking skills and this is why its accident rate is so high. Many of the bends feature roadside obstacles such as stone walls and rock faces and single vehicle impacts are common. With regard to road user safety, the local authorities could do considerably more to reduce the risk by installing passive protective measures such as deformable sign posts and crash cushions. Given the comparatively low cost of some of these measures compared with the financial (not to say human) cost of each single fatality it does beg the question of why more has not been done.

Looking at the bigger picture with regard to road safety, the figures highlight the ineffectiveness of the UK's policy on reducing accidents by simply imposing speed limits and suggest that making greater use of passive safety measures would in fact be vastly more (cost) effective. The safety measures introduced on the A40 point clearly the way ahead, should the UK's Department for Transport decide to take effective action. Consultation with road authorities on improvements show that simple, relatively inexpensive engineering measures have cut fatal and serious collisions by 70% in the last three years on the top 10 roads listed in the report. Improvements to signing and markings, resurfacing, particularly the use of high-friction anti-skid treatments, and the layout and signing of junctions are common.

<http://www.ukroads.org/ukroadsafety>