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## Speeding and joy riding

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## **Speeding and Joy Riding**

**Karen Lumsden**

Speeding refers to driving a motorized vehicle (such as a car or motorbike) above the speed limit prescribed by the state. Like other forms of crime, definitions of speeding are dependent upon the historical context, situational factors, and societal norms and laws. Joy riding involves the theft of a vehicle, its use in various driving performances (including speeding), and often its subsequent destruction through setting fire to it (or 'torching' it).

Since the invention of the car, issues of road safety and in particular the regulation of speeding have been matters of contestation for governments, police, road safety organizations, the media and concerned citizens alike. The car has historically been viewed as both a means of increasing mobility and freedom, and as a socially harmful technology. In the wrong hands the car is a deadly weapon which has the potential to kill and/or injure innocent city dwellers such as pedestrians, cyclists, and drivers/passengers in other vehicles. Over 90 per cent of the world's fatalities on the roads occur in low income and middle income countries, which have only 48 per cent of the world's vehicles (World Health Organization 2009). The maxim 'speed kills', is also reflected in the number of road traffic fatalities in high income countries, with the recurring claim that young male drivers are generally more likely to partake in risky driving behaviours, such as speeding. Factors behind the elevated risk are said to include mobility patterns and vehicle characteristics (for instance the vehicle is often borrowed); psychological characteristics, such as thrill-seeking and over-confidence; lower tolerance of alcohol compared with older people; and excess or inappropriate speed, the most common error among young drivers and motorbike riders (Peden *et al.* 2004, 79).

In various countries, speed limits have long been the subject of political and public contestation and debate. The mass majority of motorists have at some point exceeded the speed limit, and for instance in many countries there has been reluctance from those in positions of power (such as magistrates, politicians, and the authorities) and many motorists themselves, to view car crime (including speeding) as 'real crime' (Corbett 2003). Thus, licensed motorists found guilty of speeding have tended to receive minimal sentences and/or punishments. In terms of the detection of speeding (and other road traffic offences), police and the authorities have come to utilize a range of surveillance technologies such as speed cameras, radar guns, and automatic number-plate recognition (ANPR), in addition to regular police patrols. Speed is also legitimized by agents of the state when used in the context of high-speed police pursuits and by other emergency services such as the fire and ambulance services. This again highlights the contextual nature of definitions of deviance, as driving at speed is deemed acceptable in emergency situations involving the authorities.

In contrast to legally licensed motorists who may speed during their daily car journeys, and state agents authorized to drive at speed for the purposes of public protection and safety, joy riders can be seen to directly challenge and transgress boundaries of legality and illegality in relation to the car. Joy riding and similar forms of car theft such as 'taking without the owner's consent' (TWOC-ing) and 'taking and driving away a vehicle' (TDA), shed light on the relationship between car culture, social class and gender. The term 'joy riding' highlights the pleasurable, thrilling, and transgressive nature of the act for its participants. For young working-class males, joy riding allows for participation in car culture which is otherwise prevented due to their stagnated social and economic positions. Thus, many criminological studies of joy riding recognise that the popularity of the practice is indicative of, and related to, the car's

totemic status as a (desirable) consumer good. Classic criminological studies of joy riders also highlight the importance of spectators who gather to watch the performances or 'illicit rodeos' of the joy riders (Campbell 1993).

Boy racers (as they are known in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia) also highlight the blurry boundaries between deviance engaged in by the legal motorist and that of the joy rider. As legally licenced motorists, boy racers challenge and invert the norms of mainstream car culture via their engagement in speeding, illegal street racing and other risky driving manoeuvres (such as 'wheel-spins', 'doughnuts' and 'handbrake turns') and also via their customization of technical, mechanical and aesthetic aspects of the car (Lumsden 2013). Young male drivers are seen to threaten the mass majority of 'respectable' motorists. Importantly however, for both joy riders and boy racers, participation in car culture (albeit via deviant means) is crucial for the formation of individual and peer identity and provides a rite of passage into adult life.

Speeding, joy riding and illegal street racing are common forms of entertainment in the media and popular culture, which reinforce the image of the 'dangerous' young male driver. Examples include the classic film *Rebel without a Cause* starring James Dean and the illegal street racing scene found in the *Fast and the Furious* films. The high-speed police pursuit and images of the joy rider and boy racer also regularly feature in reality television *exposés* and 'live' news reports on television. These examples highlight the criminalization process which occurs in terms of the individuals' engagement in the act of speeding, joy riding or boy racing, the response of the police, government and other criminal justice agencies, and the representation of the act in media and popular discourses. This process brings the image of the deviant driver to the public's attention.

A criminological analysis of speeding and joy riding draws attention to the historical labeling and stereotyping of certain groups and individuals as dangerous drivers by those in positions of power, and in contrast to the mass of respectable motorists. These activities each have in common the quest for participation in car culture, whether through legal or deviant means. By viewing speeding and joy riding through the lens of criminology we can also bear witness to the tension inherent in car culture between the freedom of the open road (and thus unrestricted automobility) and the need to temper, regulate and govern deviant driving behaviours such as speeding, joy riding and boy racing.

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## Author Biography

Dr Karen Lumsden is Lecturer in Sociology at Loughborough University and has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Aberdeen. Her research interests include crime and deviance, youth culture, car culture, policing, gender, social networking and qualitative methods. Her doctoral research was an ethnographic study of boy racers in Scotland and is published as *Boy Racer Culture: Youth Masculinity and Deviance* (2013, Routledge). Her research has also been published in academic journals including: *Sociology*, *Sociological Research Online*, *Policing and Society* and *Qualitative Research*.