

The Accident-Prone Automobile Driver A Study of the Psychiatric and Social Background

W. A. Tillman and G. E. Hobbs

Volume 17, Number 4, 1950

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1103166ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1103166ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

HEC Montréal

ISSN

0004-6027 (print)

2817-3465 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Tillman, W. & Hobbs, G. (1950). The Accident-Prone Automobile Driver: A Study of the Psychiatric and Social Background. *Assurances*, 17(4), 167–174.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1103166ar>

Article abstract

Deux médecins, de London, Ontario, ont fait une enquête sur la manière de conduire d'un certain nombre de chauffeurs de taxi de leur ville, grâce à un octroi de la Canadian Life Insurance Officers Association. Ils ont voulu rechercher sous l'aspect physiologique, psychologique et social, les raisons pour lesquelles certains conduisent prudemment et d'autres follement; pourquoi certains paraissent indemnes d'accidents et d'autres les accumulent. Pour arriver à des conclusions précises, ils ont adopté une méthode de travail : ils ont questionné et examiné de nombreux sujets : ils ont établi l'histoire de famille aussi bien que le comportement familial et social de chacun d'eux. C'est le résultat de leur étude qu'ils ont apporté au 105e congrès de l'American Psychiatric Association, tenu à Montréal en mai 1949. On trouvera ici des extraits de leur travail. Si nous n'avons pu le reproduire intégralement, nous avons pensé qu'il intéresserait le lecteur d'en lire de copieus extraits indiquant la méthode suivie et quelques conclusions. – A.

The Accident-Prone Automobile Driver

A Study of the Psychiatric and Social Background

by

W. A. TILLMAN, M.D., and G. E. HOBBS, M.D.

London, Ontario

167

Deux médecins, de London, Ontario, ont fait une enquête sur la manière de conduire d'un certain nombre de chauffeurs de taxi de leur ville, grâce à un octroi de la Canadian Life Insurance Officers Association. Ils ont voulu rechercher sous l'aspect physiologique, psychologique et social, les raisons pour lesquelles certains conduisent prudemment et d'autres follement; pourquoi certains paraissent indemnes d'accidents et d'autres les accumulent. Pour arriver à des conclusions précises, ils ont adopté une méthode de travail: ils ont questionné et examiné de nombreux sujets; ils ont établi l'histoire de famille aussi bien que le comportement familial et social de chacun d'eux. C'est le résultat de leur étude qu'ils ont apporté au 105e congrès de l'American Psychiatric Association, tenu à Montréal en mai 1949. On trouvera ici des extraits de leur travail. Si nous n'avons pu le reproduire intégralement, nous avons pensé qu'il intéresserait le lecteur d'en lire de copieux extraits indiquant la méthode suivie et quelques conclusions.

— A.

I — INTRODUCTION

It has been established for many years that when the frequency distribution of accidents in any group is analysed there are a number of individuals who have a greater proportion of accidents than can be explained on chance alone. The personality of this group has been described and it has been suggested that this is the determining factor that makes them more accident-labile.

In this study the existence of accident-prone drivers among bus drivers has been established from a statistical point of view. A group of taxi drivers has been interviewed to determine personality charac-

teristics and these findings have been compared with the driving records. The high and low accident groups differ markedly in their personality characteristics. *The high accident group shows marked intolerance for, and aggression against, any authority, dating from early childhood.* The origin of this aggressiveness is to be found in an unstable home background. In many instances this personality feature shows up in antisocial behaviour in the individual's life history. The high accident record is one manifestation of these personality characteristics. To determine if these same characteristics were to be found within the general driving population, 96 drivers with a history of 4 or more accidents in the London district were checked by social and law enforcement agencies. These were compared with a control group of 100 accident-free drivers. Sixty-six percent of the high accident group were known to these agencies in contrast to 9% of the control group. The findings are similar to those noted in the taxi driver group. Thus, within the general driving population, too, there are many individuals whose high accident record is related to personality characteristics that influence their driving in such a manner as to make them accidentliable. The personality characteristics and social background of high accident drivers must be considered in any over-all attack on the automobile accident problem. This can be done at a sufficiently superficial level without specialized psychiatric training.

II — SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ACCIDENT-PRONE DRIVER

The findings in a group of 20 high accident taxi drivers as compared with 20 low accident drivers are shown in Table I. It is interesting to note that although the number of drivers interviewed is relatively small the differences noted are statistically highly significant, except in the case of the employment record. On the basis of this interview we have drawn up the personality profiles of the high and low accident groups.

(A) *The High Accident Taxi Driver* (1, 2).¹

(1) *Family History.* — The parental divorce rate is high. Gross disharmony among the parents, along with one or both parents being

¹ In this outline we have followed Dunbar closely.

described as excessively strict, was frequently found. The father was often described as a poor provider, with a record of being an excessive drinker and having very few friends.

(2) *Childhood Adjustment.* — Eleven gave a history of childhood instability of an aggressive type, such as temper tantrums, frequent fights, bully characteristics, leader of a gang, and frequent appearances at the Juvenile Court. An equal number gave a history of the nonaggressive type of childhood anxiety such as enuresis, fears of fights, dark, deep water, excessive daydreaming, etc.

(3) *School Adjustment.* — Their academic standing at school was average. There were frequent records of truancy, disciplinary infractions, etc. They showed interest in sports involving group activity and bodily contact, such as rugby, etc. There was a strong interest in body build. Most left school to seek independence.

(4) *Work Record.* — The work history was that of frequent short-time employments, the man often stating that he had been discharged. The adjustment with employers was usually poor. This group is usually satisfied to remain with its present employment as it offers the line of least resistance and allows freer play of their aggressiveness than do more settled routine occupations.

(5) *Social Adjustment.* — These were individuals with many acquaintances but few friends. Their emotional attachments were superficial and varied from day to day, as their impulsiveness dictated. In a group they always attempted to be the center of the stage. Interest in hobbies was rarely found. Their main activities were found in the field of sports, drinking, gambling, and occasionally dancing.

(6) *Sexual Adjustment.* — This group, if married, tended to be unfaithful to their wives and showed little interest in, or sense of responsibility, toward their families. A history of promiscuity was common, but the V.D. rate was not particularly high. There was little anxiety or feeling of guilt over sexual misdemeanors.

(7) *Previous Health.* — There was a story of the usual childhood diseases. Personal injuries resulting from accidents were common; otherwise the health could be considered as good. There were few functional complaints.

(8) *Behaviour Patterns.* — As a group they behaved in an immature manner. Filthy language was used freely. They were good conversationalists, but took advantage of every situation to try to im-

press others with their importance. They showed no concern over their problems. Personal dress tended to be eccentric.

(9) *Driving Habits.* — As a group they were easily distracted while driving. They tended to become readily annoyed at other motorists on the road, often criticising their own driving mistakes in others. Horn honking and racing other cars away from a stop light were their specialties. As a group they showed a marked interest in the mechanical aspects of the car, and expressed no concern over the possible mechanical limitations of the automobile. Their cars were often untidy, dirty, and contained flashy accessories. They tended to be discourteous to their passengers.

170

(10) *Philosophical Outlook.* — Their thinking was dominated by fatalistic ideas and interest in the material aspects of life. They dislike discipline, abhorred routine, and expressed a strong desire to be their own bosses. They considered only the immediate future, thinking only of the satisfactions of each day.

(B) *The Taxi Driver with the Low Accident Frequency.*

(1) *Family History.* — Parental divorce rate was low and harmony was usually considered adequate. Parents were usually described as firm, understanding individuals, and were considered to be stable, well-adjusted personalities.

(2) *Childhood Adjustment.* — Features of mild instability were occasionally present, but these were always of the nonaggressive type. Tendencies most frequently noted were overt fears of the dark and heights, fear of fights, and excessive shyness. They were usually followers of a gang. A history of active delinquency was rarely obtained.

(3) *School History.* — The academic standing was average. In no instance was there a history of truancy. Interest in group sports was common. The driver usually left school because family finances demanded it.

(4) *Work Record.* — There was usually a history of long periods of employment with adequate adjustment to previous employers. The drivers frequently expressed a desire to better their situation in life by changing from their present occupation and seeking a more stable livelihood.

(5) *Social Adjustment.* — These drivers usually possessed a group of friends. As individuals they tended to be quiet and con-

servative when in a crowd. Usually they expressed an interest in hobbies such as gardening, sports, church organizations, etc. This is one of the most outstanding differences between these and the high accident group. If they drank at all they tended to be moderate drinkers and they seldom gambled.

(6) *Sexual Adjustment.* — If married, these men were faithful to their wives with a marked interest in their home and family. Sexual promiscuity was not common and if present it was associated with a worry about their misdemeanors.

(7) *Previous Health.* — There were the usual childhood diseases, but it appeared that this group had a higher incidence of sickness, such as minor respiratory infections, etc., than the accident repeater group. Functional complaints were relatively common and they tended to be health conscious.

(8) *Behaviour Patterns.* — Usually they were quiet, reserved individuals with whom it was difficult to establish rapport. They were conscientious about their work and tended to brood considerably over their problems.

(9) *Driving Habits.* — These men were serious while driving and often refused to talk. They tended to be courteous to other drivers on the road and stated that they were conscious of the fact that the other driver might do the wrong thing. They appreciated the possible mechanical limitations of their vehicle. As a group they did not show strong mechanical tendencies, but their cars were usually kept clean and conservative in appearance. In contrast to the high accident group they were courteous to passengers.

(10) *Philosophical Outlook.* — This group seemed to be concerned about the welfare of others. They gave serious consideration to the difficulties of the future and adjusted well to any discipline involved in their occupation.

The following case histories illustrate the above characteristics:

1. CASE NO. 38. — *Example of Chronic High Accident Group.* — The following case is an extreme example of the high accident taxi driver:

Age: 28 years. Driving experience: 800,000 miles (driver's estimate). Accidents: 8 serious accidents and 70-80 minor accidents.

Parental History. — Father a laborer with history of frequent industrial accidents; is described as an unstable individual, with a

severe temper who consumes alcohol freely. Mother described as an oversolicitous, argumentative, unstable individual who is a poor organizer and housekeeper. Parental harmony: Parental adjustment is poor, with gross disharmony.

Personal History. — He is the second of 2 children: has never adjusted well to his sister. He bit his fingernails and stuttered as a child, and has always had severe temper tantrums. States he was picked on at home. He associated with a gang and was a leader of the "tough guys." He is described as a bully and was a frequenter of Juvenile Court. He indicates that he has always fought, acted first and thought after. He brags about his childhood prowess, claiming that he put it over the police many times.

172

School History. — Attended school from 6-13 years of age and was finally expelled for assaulting his teacher. He was a disciplinary problem and a truant.

Occupational History. — This man worked on a farm for several years after leaving school and then began to work as a truck driver. He was discharged from 2 different jobs prior to enlistment. He enlisted in the Navy under false pretences and was discharged and then enlisted in the Army. He did not serve overseas. Had 30 A. W. L's while in the Army and also spent 8 months in a reformatory for stealing. Since discharge, he has had 3 different jobs with trucking firms, being discharged from one for insubordination, and is now employed as a taxi driver.

Sexual Adjustment. — He is married with 5 children. At present he is being taken into court for nonsupport of his wife and children. He is under treatment for venereal disease.

Social Adjustment. — He claims few friends and states that his chief hobbies are drinking, gambling, and "shooting pool." He likes mechanics and tinkering with motors. He displays a gross antagonism toward discipline and routine. He has had 15 court charges and 7 jail sentences for such things as stealing, alcoholism, assault and battery, etc.

Physical Examination. — This man, being at present under treatment for syphilis, was investigated thoroughly in the hospital 2 months ago. The physical examination was essentially normal except for the presence of haemorrhoids and a positive blood Wassermann.

Plans for Future. — He plans to carry on as a taxi driver, and possibly, in the future, to buy a farm.

2. CASE NO. BC. — *Example of Low Accident Group.* — This is a fairly typical example of a driver in the low accident group:

Age: 40 years. Driving experience: 2,000,000 miles (driver's estimate). Accidents: 1 major and 6 minor.

Parental History. — Father in good health, retired farmer. Stern, but fair disciplinarian. Stable personality. Mother moderately nervous,

oversolicitous woman. Fair in her discipline. Parental harmony: Few family arguments. Home life happy. Father is good provider.

Personal History. — He is the third of 4 children. He had good health in childhood and associated with the gang as a follower. He got into few fights, tending to avoid them, and denies temper tantrums or excess phobias, stating only that he was a daydreamer. He had no difficulty with juvenile police. He claims to have adjusted well to all the members of his family, who are apparently stable, with the exception of one brother, an alcoholic.

School History. — Attended school from 5-13 years of age. Enjoyed school, but had to leave as a result of family finances. He did not play truant and was not considered a disciplinary problem.

Occupational History. — He worked on a farm up until 23 years of age. He claims he adjusted quickly to different environments. He was employed 18 months driving a truck and then began the occupation of taxi driver. Has worked at this for 20 years, and now owns several cabs. He was never discharged from a job.

Sexual Adjustment. — He is happily married and has one child. He and his wife have many friends. There is no history of marital infidelity or venereal disease.

Social Adjustment. — This man does not drink. His chief interests are his home and garden. He is interested in sports, chiefly as an observer, and takes an active interest in youth groups. He has many friends and is well respected in the community.

Physical Examination. — No physical examination was completed.

Plans for Future. — He intends to continue in his present occupation.

3. — CASE NO. 14. — *Example of Change in Driving Habits Associated with Developing Emotional Maturity.* — The discussion of accident proneness in this group of drivers would suggest that this tendency is a fixed long-term characteristic. In most instances this is so. The following case would suggest that this pattern is no more rigid than the personality pattern, and if there is an event in a person's life that changes this pattern of reaction and philosophy of life, then his accident pattern will change with it:

Parental History. — Father died when driver was 28 years of age. He was an engineer; described as a strict, nervous parent with chronic ill health. Mother died when the driver was 20 years of age. She was described as a strict, domineering woman. Apparently she had no friends and few interests outside her home. Parental harmony: Poor. Mother and father were continually arguing.

Childhood Adjustment. — Eldest of 12 children. Suffered the usual childhood diseases. He states that his mother was unfair in her

discipline toward him. He was of small stature and was very sensitive about his physical build. He claims his early home environment was unsatisfactory and he ran away from home on 2 occasions prior to leaving home permanently at 16. As a child he fractured his left forearm in a fall from a tree. He was the leader of a gang and was frequently in fights. He had a severe temper and was in Juvenile Court on 3 occasions.

174

School History. — Attended school from 5-16 years of age. His academic standing was average until his later years at school. His record was then marred with frequent truancies and disciplinary infractions. He was active and interested in sports until later years, and then he avoided sports, owing to his small stature. He left school to seek employment.

Occupational History and Social Adjustment. — (a) *Age 16-26 years:* He gives a history of 11 short-term employments, being discharged from 2 and leaving 6 voluntarily. During this time he was employed as a labourer, trucker, and taxi driver. He had no friends and displayed little interest in social activity. Apparently he had no hobbies. He roomed alone, drank to excess, gambled freely, and was sexually promiscuous. He was greatly concerned over his sexual misdemeanors. During this period 2 major and 6 minor accidents were reported. There was one court charge for reckless driving and a suspension of his taxi license for bootlegging. Driving experience during this period was approximately 50,000 miles.

(b) *Age 27-39 years:* At 27 years of age he became interested in a girl who displayed strong religious tendencies. During his courtship he joined her in church activities and gained many friends. He terminated his drinking and gambling, developed an interest in home life, and started gardening and woodworking as hobbies. Since he was 28 years of age, he has been employed as a taxi driver with the same firm. During this period he has driven 550,000 miles with a record of one minor accident.

Thus it would appear that in the taxi driver group there is a characteristic personality pattern that is associated with a high or low accident record. The personality with a high record is characterised by aggressiveness and inability to tolerate authority either at the parental or community level. This would appear to have its origin in the home background of the individual. This aggression against authority shows up in an objective way in the frequency with which this group comes in conflict with the recognized community methods of obtaining law and order. The low accident group is made up of serious, stable, well-adjusted individuals with well-integrated home backgrounds.