Violence and aggressiveness in traffic

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Abstract

Violence and aggressiveness in traffic are frequently encountered social phenomena, with important social and economic consequences. The literature in the field has focused on traffic congestion, driver stress, and the role of gender in violence and aggressiveness, being marked upward trend and professionals’ attempts to provide solutions for the reduction of such phenomena. The present paper aims to clarify the perspectives from which the concepts of violence and aggressiveness in traffic are defined; to present the Romanian law regulations in this field, the types of aggressive behavior in the traffic, their causes, and some Romanian statistics.

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Keywords: violence and aggressiveness in traffic; safety in traffic; legal regulations; traffic behavior; accident;

1. Introduction

Violence and aggressiveness in traffic have significantly increased during the last years, as the mass-media reports about accidents leaving victims have also shown. There has always been a preoccupation for the improvement of road safety, but beginning with the 90s, special attention has been given to the issue of violence and aggressiveness of drivers, as it has been ascertained that a significant number of accidents were being caused by the externalization of feelings of anger, irritation and resentment. Along with these internal factors, these manifestations were also due to the lack of assimilation of rules regarding social norms and values. Given the lack of regulations on violent and aggressive behaviour, the number of incidents and accidents which involved drivers has dramatically increased. In these conditions, the preoccupation of the authorities from different countries has become to identify those types of behaviour which can be classified as violent or aggressive, to define them, to sanction them, and

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last but not least, to find ways of preventing them. In Romania, the lack of regulations on violence and aggressiveness in traffic has generated an exacerbation of such behaviour. There is also a lack of systematic research in the field, which could offer a realistic image of the phenomenon and which could be the basis of the adoption of legislation.

2. Conceptual delimitations

Violence and aggressiveness are frequently encountered in interpersonal relationships. They are a reality of the human nature. The expression “eradication of violence” is therefore inadequate. The objective is to change the attitude towards violence, to gradually debase it by modifying the perceptions on its negative, unwanted consequences and, last but not least, to increase the control of impulses (Bălan, Micle, Săucan, & Udrea, 2010). In general terms, violence has been defined as “any form of behaviour deliberately aimed at objects, people or oneself, with the purpose of causing prejudice, injury, destruction and damage” (Mitrofan, 2003).

In the anglo-saxon area, in time, research was carried out by non-governmental organizations, public institutions or by the police. The terms used to refer to aggressiveness in traffic were aggressive driving and road rage. Aggressive driving was defined as any behaviour of a driver who deliberately creates a state of psychological or physical or both psychological and physical danger for the other traffic participants. The term road rage is defined as an extreme form of aggressive driving of a car, which implies a behaviour which deliberately aims to cause physical injury to other drivers or even to kill them (Ellison-Potter, Bell, & Deffenbacher, 2001). By aggressive behaviour in traffic we can understand: careless driving, driving very high over the speed limit, an unpredictable driving style (sudden change of the driving lane or of direction), the intimidation of other traffic participants (useless honking, driving very close to another vehicle, using the lights, making threats, swearing), up to using white weapons or fire guns, committing acts of physical aggression and using the vehicle as a weapon (Mizell, 1997; Ross, Antonowicz, 2004).

In this paper we will use the term aggressive driving and we will consider the situations which the concepts here defined refer to.

3. Causes of aggressiveness in traffic

The research carried out in the last decades has shown the existence of more causes of aggressiveness of car drivers compared to the other traffic participants. The main factors are grouped (Harris & Houston, 2010) in 4 categories: psychological (aggressive personality, the search for adrenaline, hostility, competitiveness, gender), social (the existence of passengers in the car; the age and gender of the participants aggressivity is shown to), temporal (time pressure and the time of the day) or environment related factors (the state of the road, traffic density and weather conditions).

As far as the psychological factors are concerned, research has shown that both men and women are prone to forms of mild aggressiveness in traffic (prolonged honking, swearing and teasing in traffic) (Hauber, 1980; Hennessy & Wiesenthal, 1999), but men are more likely to get involved into situations which imply physical aggression (Blanchard, Barton, & Malta, 2000). Young people are also more likely to be part of road accidents caused by an aggressive driving manner (Blanchard, Barton, & Malta, 2000). It has also repeatedly been shown that the phenomenon of violence and aggressiveness in traffic is, in the end, also a mental health issue (Galovski, Malta, & Blanchard, 2006). Research has also shown that young men who drive give in too easily, are open to suggestions and pressure from the other passengers and take on an aggressive driving style (Conner, Smith, & McMillan, 2003).
In terms of temporal factors, studies have proven that a correlation can be established between certain
times of the day and the dynamics of accidents. In other words, between certain hours, mostly in the
afternoon, there is an increase in the number of road accidents.

Last but not least, the environment related factors may be an important cause of accidents. In terms of
the weather conditions, it was ascertained that a factor that increases the aggressivity of drivers may be
the heat during daytime (Kenrick & MacFarlane, 1986).

4. The situation in Romania

Given the fact that mass media constantly present serious road accidents and altercations between
drivers, which are caused by types of behaviour associated with aggressive driving manners, there is now
an interest in having public debates on the effects of violence and aggressiveness in traffic. At the
moment, in Romania, there are neither legal ways which could make a more drastic sanctioning of
aggressive car drivers possible, nor are types of aggressive behaviour exactly defined in normative acts.
The only regulation relevant for our research is the one which prohibits swearing, obscene gestures and
offending or vulgar expressions in traffic. (article 122, point 22 from the Highway Code). The statistical
data summarised below has been obtained from the IGPB.

In Romania, due to carelessness in changing the lane, in the year 2006 there were 125 accidents,
leaving 24 dead and 118 severely injured. The following year there was an increase of the number of
accidents and in 2008 the number went up to 278 accidents, leaving 46 dead and 276 severely injured. In
2009 the numbers are similar to those from the previous year: 270 accidents, leaving 39 dead and 281
severely injured. In 2010, the number of accidents decreases significantly, by going down to 123 accidents,
leaving 22 dead and 125 severely injured. Due to not respecting the distance between vehicles, in 2006
there were 120 accidents, leaving 29 dead and 118 severely injured. The number increases in 2007 and in
2008 – 292 accidents, leaving 60 dead and 314 severely injured the number increased considerably
compared to the numbers from 2006. In 2009 the numbers decrease: 285 accidents, leaving 47 dead and
280 severely injured and in 2010 the numbers decrease again considerably: 123 accidents, leaving 22 dead
and 125 severely injured. As far as the accidents caused by speeding regardless of the traffic conditions,
by illegal overtaking etc. are concerned, the number of accidents, deaths and injured persons increased as
well significantly between 2006 and 2008 and in 2010 it decreased considerably compared to 2008.
Unfortunately, there is no scientific data on which to ground the increase of the number of accidents
between 2006 and 2009 and the following decrease between 2009 and 2010. We can therefore only
speculate on the effects of the economic boom between 2008 and 2009 and the economic crisis that
followed.

It can also be observed now that, given the lack of an adequate legislative frame, judges are also
interested in identifying ways of sanctioning those who do not respect traffic rules. Thus, in the records of
The Probation Service of The Bucharest Court there is a series of persons convicted to jail, punishment
suspended with surveillance, to which the judges have also imposed the obligation to participate to
theoretical driving and road safety classes.

5. Measures for the prevention of violence and aggressiveness in traffic

In the context of the increase of the number of violent car accidents, the reformation of the legal frame
is absolutely necessary, reason for which the Traffic Police has made a series of concrete propositions.
Thus, a project to modify the Highway Code proposes the automatic suspension of the driving licence (for
a period between 6 months and a year) for those who have committed an aggression. Repeated
overtaking, zigzag overtaking and sharply braking, as well as slalom driving on the road should also be
sanctioned. Moreover, these sanctions are also going to be made heavier by increasing the fines, the period of driving licence suspension and the length of the penal sanctions. All these actions are based on the existence of statistical data which shows that a great number of accidents are due to breaking the speed limit, not giving priority, failing to adapt speed to the traffic conditions, not checking the road before changing the lanes, failing to maintain a safe following distance etc.

The identification of the causes on which the phenomena of violence and aggressiveness in traffic are based allows us to formulate adequate intervention methods of prevention. Taking into consideration the complex causes of these phenomena, it is obvious that action should be taken at multiple levels and should include: changes in the legislation, of the jurisdiction procedures, the creation of educational driving programmes for aggressive drivers, changes in the infrastructure, of the communication means and even in the design of the cars.

A first step in the reduction and prevention of violence and aggressiveness in traffic would be to carry out relevant research with the aim of objectively identifying the phenomenon, its causes and forms of manifestation, especially those types of behaviour which truly induce violence (the use of threats, forms of physical aggression, the use of white weapons or fire guns, threatening and intimidating gestures) (Rathbone, & Huckabee, 1999). In the following stage, legal changes should be made: the types of behaviour associated with aggressiveness in traffic should be explicitly incriminated and more severely sanctioned (including even the privation of liberty). Such regulations are being adopted in more and more countries, both in North-American and in Europe.

Another modification of the approach towards aggressive drivers would be to give courts the possibility to send violent or aggressive drivers to structured programmes, in order to help them improve their aggressiveness management abilities, to make them realise the consequences of aggressive behaviour and to increase their ability of making decisions. The evaluation of such programmes has proven the efficiency of this approach (Mann, Anglin, Wilkins, Vingilis, Macdonald, & Sheu, 1994). The other traffic participants should be encouraged to report to the police aggressive and violent manifestations, which would be a way to encourage the development of civic conscience. Programmes for drivers who drive under the influence of alcohol, the introduction of the graduated licensing programme, the redesign of the infrastructure to avoid extreme crowding and blockages are also needed.

Another factor which may contribute to the reduction of aggressiveness and violence in traffic is the education of drivers. Television is from this point of view very useful because it helps to promote, for example, a series of campaigns regarding the risks which drivers are exposed to when they drive aggressively. It would also be very useful if the psychological test for the driving licence exam would include the evaluation of the potential for aggressiveness of the candidate.

As far as the road system is concerned, a series of modifications could include the improvement of traffic monitoring, setting up speed cameras and creating places where the traffic situations which involve aggressive drivers could be reported. The roads have to be designed in such a way as to impede the manifestation of aggressive and violent behaviour, by installing separating fences which could prevent drivers from changing the direction or by installing devices which prevent drivers from speeding up. Last but not least, measures should also be centered on the creation of an environment which could contribute to the reduction of the stress car drivers are subjected to. Research has shown that an environment with a lot of vegetation and a rethinking of the parking places on motorways can contribute to the increase of tolerance levels in case of frustration and, therefore, to the increase of the level of safety (Cackowski & Nasar, 2003). Last but not least, the traffic police plays an essential role as well, through its active presence in traffic (setting up radars, monitoring of traffic from cars which don’t have the police signs) which contributes to the increase of the level of safety in traffic.
References


