It takes 'Two to Tangle'
A look at urban crashes

Kevin Williams – September, 2024
www.survivalskills.co.uk

Introduction

By the time I was training up as a CBT instructor towards the end of 1995 I had some inklings that the 'blind Volvo drivers kill bikers' message that I'd been hearing via the bike press for so many years wasn't actually right.

By this time, it was getting easier to find official statistics online, and in fact, when I read the available research, I quickly realised that although in urban areas the ‘car pulls out from the left’ (right side in the US) collisions make up around 70% of urban collisions, the resulting crashes rarely kill us. That's because almost all urban crashes happen at low speed, just as you'd expect in an urban area.

And when you think about it, if a car pulls out into the road in front of us from the left (right in the US), it's more like hitting a brick wall. So once the car is in our path, it's our own reaction time and our speed that really matters. I discovered some years ago that most riders killed in this classic collision actually turn out to be exceeding the speed limit - sometimes by a considerable margin.

Some Data

So, if the car emerging from the left (right side in the US) incident doesn't kill riders in urban areas, what does?

Now, I've been researching bike crashes since the mid-1990s but it wasn't until I attended a BikeSafe course with the Metropolitan Police in 2002 that I discovered what the killer crashes in London actually were.

The figures I jotted down in my notes (I've still got them) were these:

- around 50% of all fatal motorcycle crashes in London involve a bike colliding with an oncoming driver turning right (on coming driver turning left in the US)

- only around 1 in 12 fatalities happens when a driver pulls out from the left (right in the US) into the path of a bike

So, although everyone 'knows' about 'killer drivers' pulling out of side roads, for most of us, it's survivable. Then not only do we survive to tell our mates (and most recently to post the on-bike video of the crash we filmed with our GoPro on YouTube or TikTok), we also get to hear about

plenty of other crashes via Chinese whispers about someone's mate, who heard from his buddy who had a friend who knew a rider who crashed... etc. etc.

A Skewed Picture of Urban Crashes – what part does filtering play

That probably accounts for why we have something of a skewed picture of the classic urban SMIDSY (Sorry Maate, I Didn't See You often called Looked But Didn't See) collision. That's probably what accounted for the regular 'blind Volvo driver' messages in the bike press. The story about junction collisions turns out to be misleading.

Of the other London fatalities - according to the Met Police figures - most of the rest turned out to happen when the rider was filtering, and not always at high speed either.

Most riders who filter believe that if we keep the speed down it should be safe enough - there are all sorts of articles and guides about how fast we should ride relative to the traffic around us.

So, I'll just quickly mention an incident that happened to a friend of mine. She is an experienced rider, and at the time was commuting to work in central London, so was fully used to dealing with city centre traffic. One day she was filtering down Regent Street and when she couldn't make any more forward progress, she stopped in the gap between two cars and waited.

Filtering Perfectly Safe?

Perfectly wrong. We only have to fall under another vehicle for the consequences to be very serious indeed.

A pedestrian came through the gap, looking to her left for traffic coming the other way and ran full-tilt into my friend with enough force to knock the bike over. Both of them ended up on the ground. They were both very lucky there was a traffic island in front of the bike - either of them could have ended up under the wheels of an oncoming vehicle.

In fact, the BikeSafe team also talked about a fatal crash where a filtering rider was nudged very lightly by a car he was passing moving to its right and clipping the rear of the bike. The bike toppled on its side and walking pace and was barely marked. The rider went under the wheels of a car coming the other way at speed. He died instantly.

It's this proximity to other moving vehicles that makes filtering risky, not simply the speed. I'll be honest, even after more than half-million miles of dispatching, I hadn't really thought that through.

Conclusion

So, to sum up. The vehicle emerging from the left (right in the US) is the main cause of junction collisions between bike and car, but rarely results in a fatal collision. The oncoming vehicle that turns right 9left in the US) across the rider's path is the high-risk junction incident but much rarer. And filtering collisions that put the rider on the deck are the killers.