

ROAD SAFETY

Speak up and save your life

Study shows that chiding a reckless driver could avert possible danger

By KEVIN J KELLEY
in Washington DC

Many Kenyans' lives would be spared if matatu passengers spoke out against reckless driving on Kenyan roads, a new study suggests.

Researchers at the Georgetown University in Washington DC base this finding on the results of an experiment in which signs encouraging passengers to voice concerns were posted inside more than 1,000 long-distance matatus.

This intervention reduced the number of road incidents leading to lower insurance claims by about 50 per cent, according to study authors James Habyarimana and William Jack.

The paper, entitled *Heckle and Chide: Results of a Randomized Road Safety Intervention in Kenya*, was published on Tuesday by the Washington-based Centre for Global Development.

'The Association of Kenyan Insurers estimates that 3,000 Kenyans died in road accidents last year'

A variety of stickers in both Kiswahili and English bear messages such as "Don't just sit there as he drives dangerously! Stand up. Speak up. Now!"

Matatu drivers were encouraged to leave the stickers in place by means of a weekly lottery whereby a driver could win up to Sh5,000 if his vehicle was found to have all stickers intact upon inspection by the research team.

The Association of Kenyan Insurers estimates that over 3,000 Kenyans — or about nine per day — died in traffic-related incidents last year.

The authors recall that President Kibaki was badly injured in a road accident while campaigning in 2002 and that former President Moi was involved in a serious road accident in 2006.

Death-seekers

It is popularly believed in Kenya that "otherwise rational young males are transformed, Jekyll-and-Hyde-like, into irrational death-seekers when they occupy the driver's seat of a minibus, or matatu," Habyarimana and Jack write.

"Our intervention motivates passengers to exercise their power as consumers, literally giving them a voice, by encouraging them to speak up, to heckle and chide the driver when his behaviour compromises their safety."

Road accidents account for as many deaths in Africa and the rest of the developing world as does malaria, according to the World Health Organisation. Vehicle crashes also claim twice as many lives as do war and criminal violence combined, the researchers note.