

## Accidental killers: overlooked victims on America's roads

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In 1977, when she was 22, Maryann Gray killed an 8-year-old boy who ran in front of her car. He had darted, unseen, from the sidewalk of a rural Ohio street, and she had no way to avoid him. The driver of a delivery truck behind Gray said that if she hadn't hit the boy, he would have.

Gray still remembers the boy's anguished mother running from the house and a panicked crowd gathering around the bleeding child. Stunned, alone and fearful that she might be attacked, Gray joined an often overlooked and never envied group: America's accidental killers.

"I definitely did blame myself, even though there's no empirical evidence that that's true," Gray said in a recent interview, nearly 30 years since the incident. "I was really convinced that I was a bad person."

Gray lived every driver's worst nightmare--and has been reliving it in quiet agony ever since. Now, after years of trying to come to terms with what happened, Gray is reaching out to the many others who she believes must share similar experiences. She has created a Web site, [Accidental-Impacts.org](http://Accidental-Impacts.org), which offers the chance for accidental killers to share their stories, as well as receive reassurance that "One mistake does not define you."

"We did kill somebody, and it's important to recognize the severity of that," Gray said. "But while we can't control what happened, we can control our reaction to it."

A driver's typical reaction immediately after a fatal collision is "fight, flight, freeze or faint," said Anne Kellogg, of the nonprofit Maple Counseling Center in Beverly Hills. Kellogg coordinates a round-the-clock crisis response team that goes to the scene of major accidents to offer practical support to all affected parties, including the person who may have been responsible.

"We provide a compassionate presence as they go through the questioning process," Kellogg said. "They are in a state of shock, but are going to need to go through certain procedures with law enforcement."

Kellogg's mostly voluntary team provides the same kind of assistance to drivers as they do to victims' families or bystanders who may have witnessed the event. This includes contacting family members, arranging rides home and describing the likely physiological reactions to the incident and offering advice on how to cope with them. They also provide referrals to counseling services for longer-term care.

Over eight years, the center has built a trusting relationship with the police and fire departments, who now call the response team whenever a major accident occurs.

Such assistance remains rare, however. The focus of most post-accident support is the bereaved families, and the drivers themselves are often overlooked. Although several crisis response units have been established in recent years--many associated with law enforcement agencies and others with independent nonprofit groups--Gray's Web site is the only known resource directed specifically to accidental killers.

There is also little in the way of specialist professional knowledge for dealing with these situations. Neither the American Counseling Association nor the American Automobile Association, for instance, could name any experts in this field.

Statistics, however, support Gray's hunch that there are many more accidental killers than most people acknowledge. In 2005, more than 43,000 people died on America's roads, according to the National Highway Safety Administration. Alcohol played a part in 39 percent of all fatal crashes; a driver was speeding in 30 percent. The use of a cell phone at the wheel can also contribute to negligent driving.

No official national figures are collated, but a significant portion of the remaining fatal accidents are precisely that: accidental, with no recklessness reported and no criminal charges filed. But the stigma attached to being a killer, even an accidental one, means few people are inclined to share their stories from behind the wheel. Instead they suffer in silence.

"They're like a shadow population," Gray said of the people she hopes to connect with through Accidental-Impacts. "They're really quite alone with what they've done."

Even if they are not sued, vilified or labeled as murderers, many accidental killers experience crippling shame and guilt that can last for years. Sometimes there is even a residual hostility toward the deceased, especially if the victim acted carelessly.

A 1981 study into the stress encountered by accidental killers quoted one unnamed subject whose car collided with a racing motorcyclist, killing him, "My unintentionally killing that person is unfair punishment to me for his unlawful actions."

In the worst cases, some accidental killers can develop post-traumatic stress disorder, which is most commonly associated with war veterans or women who have been raped. Experts in post-traumatic stress say that the initial response to a traumatic event is crucial; on-the-spot counseling can help guard against severe long-term effects.

Gray received no such assistance in 1977--a police officer even told her to drive herself home, though she was unable to do so. In the following months, she suffered hallucinations when she tried to drive again, mistaking a branch or a shadow for a person in the road and slamming on the brakes. She wanted to tell her story but did not feel

comfortable discussing the incident, even with the man she later married. She chose not to start a family because she felt scared around children.

"My anxiety was so high, I didn't think I could be a good mother," she said. "I accepted distance and loneliness as the price I had to pay for what I did."

Eventually, in the wake of a well-publicized 2003 incident in a Santa Monica, Calif., farmer's market, where an elderly driver killed 10 pedestrians, Gray began facing her own demons. For the first time, she investigated the circumstances of her own accident, and eventually she formed Accidental-Impacts. She also wrote articles on the subject for newspapers and National Public Radio.

"That was really scary but a real turning point for me," Gray said. "Some people said that it was self-indulgent, but at that time I got all the support I didn't get before, that I had denied myself."

By working to overcome her own trauma in this way, Gray turned her previous helplessness into helpfulness. She hopes she can now help ward off similar distress in others.

"One of the reasons it haunted me for so many years," Gray said, "was because I didn't have enough help at the time."

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