

An Analysis of Hitchhiking

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Preface

Academic studies and reliable data on the subject of hitchhiking are scarce. Therefore, most of the information presented in this paper is based on online articles and verified by the author's personal hitchhiking experience.

It focuses on the hazards that come with soliciting rides as well as ways to increase hitchhiking security. Furthermore, deviant legal situations from different countries are discussed and signaling methods explained.

An objective of this paper is to contrast the differences between factual dangers involved in hitchhiking and the perception thereof. However, since the majority of interviewees do not have any experience in hitchhiking, studies are bound to be distorted due to biases and prejudices.

Based on reports by the Californian law enforcement agencies, the types of crimes committed by both the hitchhiker and the motorist are broken down by gender and age and, together with other findings, will help generating an overview of the dangers involved in hitchhiking.

1 Legal Situation

The majority of countries do not have specific laws regulating hitchhiking. However, some exceptions are discussed below.

1.1 Cuba

Due to the US embargo imposed on Cuba in 1960, there is only a limited number of cars available and spare parts for reparation are hard to come by. Public transportation is insufficient and taxis are too expensive for most residents. Therefore, the Cuban government has passed laws regulating hitchhiking.

Official hitchhiking gathering points, usually on the outskirts of cities, have been designated to ensure simple and fast pickups, often under the supervision of government officials, so-called amarillos, overseeing the process. Depending on the type of motorist (indicated by colored license plates), different laws are enforced:

State vehicles (yellow, caramel and white plates) are required by law to pick up Cuban nationals as long as there are vacant seats. Failing to abide can be persecuted. Military (brown plates) as well as privately owned (blue) are not obliged by law, yet it is encouraged and expected. Immunity is granted to tourists (green plates) and diplomats (black).

1.2 Netherlands



Hitchhiking is permitted throughout the Netherlands with the exception of motorways ("autosnelweg") and junctions. Much alike Cuba, official hitchhiking spots indicate places where motorists can pick up hitchhikers easily. However, these are not designated by national authorities but city councils and are found most often in university cities.



1.3 Poland

Hitchhiking was formalized in Poland in 1957 by the National Tourist Board. A system was designed in order to reward motorists who pick up travelers frequently, called "Akcja Autostop" ("Operation Autostop"). Hitchhikers would buy booklets with coupons which they gave to their driver. By the end of each season, motorists who collected the most coupons would exchange them for prizes, the rest took part in a lottery.

With the purchase of such booklets came insurance for the hitchhiker in case of car accidents in order to encourage travelers participating in this system.

It was discontinued officially in 1995.



Two hitchhikers in Poland with booklets, July 1966

2 Signaling Methods

When trying to catch a ride, the methods used by hitchhikers can be divided into two categories: oral and non-oral approach.

2.1 Non-Oral

When the intention of a hitchhiker to solicit a ride is initially displayed using physical gestures or signs, we speak of a non-oral approach. It is performed next to transportation routes and aims to inform passing motorists of the hitchhiker's need for a lift. Due to the speed of the vehicles, it is crucial to use simple, broadly understood signaling methods. The two most common are discussed below.

Physical Gestures

Physical gestures consist mainly of, but are not limited to, hand signals. The one most commonly associated with hitchhiking is the "thumbs-up".



It is unknown when and why exactly the "thumbs-up" became associated with the wish for travelers to be picked up. However, references can be found as media began to cover the newly emerging method of hitchhiking soon after the first automobiles were mass-produced:

"The hitch-hiker stands at the edge of the road and points with his thumb in the direction he wishes to go."

(1925: The American Magazine, page 15)

The "thumbs-up" became popular with the much acclaimed movie "It Happened One Night" (1934), where the protagonist explains proper thumbing techniques:

"It's all in that ol' thumb, see? Some people do it like this. (He waves his hand quickly) Or like this. (waves again, but slower) All wrong. Never get anywhere. [...] Yeah, boy, but that ol' thumb never fails."



The practice of using the "thumbs-up" has spread since and is well known in countries outside the United States. However, in most places, the "thumbs-up" has other meanings as well. It is regarded as a sign of approval in most English-speaking countries, but is a great insult in Afghanistan, Iran, Greece and parts of Italy, West Africa and South America.

In countries where the "thumbs-up" is either offensive or not recognized as a way to indicate the wish for a lift, a different hand signal may be used.

A widely understood signal to slow down is to extend an arm and flex the hand up and down at the wrist or, as a variation, move the entire arm up and down. However, this gesture only indicates the traveler's wish for the car to stop, but doesn't show the intention of hitchhiking.

Signs

Using cardboard signs will significantly reduce a hitchhiker's waiting time and may be combined with physical gestures as described above.



The more straightforward way is to write directions, such as the hitchhiker's destination or a big city that is on the way, the name of the highway that leads there or simply a cardinal point.

The alternative is to write a message that aims to loosen up motorists, makes them smile and convinces them the hitchhiker is a funny and companionable person - for instance "Freshly Showered" or "Runaway Bride".

No matter what a hitchhiker writes on the cardboard, some things have to be taken into consideration. As mentioned in the introduction, motorists passing by only have little time to read the message, depending on the vehicle's speed, the lighting conditions, the motorist's eyesight and so on. Therefore, it is important to write in big letters with a color that ensures sufficient contrast. Long words may be abbreviated, such as "Amsterdam" to "A'dam". Increasing character spacing makes a text easier to read from afar.

2.2 Oral

Instead of waiting for a vehicle on the side of the road, approaching motorists directly proves to have many advantages. First and foremost, the main cause for long waiting periods, that is motorists ignoring the hitchhiker, is eliminated. The hitchhiker has more time to explain the situation, where he needs to go and what he wants from the motorist. A good place to start such a conversation are petrol stations.

Furthermore, the danger assessment on both sides is easier and more accurate. The motorist has time to decide whether or not the hitchhiker is trustworthy and vice versa.

3 Hazards

In most western countries, hitchhiking is considered to be dangerous by the general public. Parents teach their children not to enter a stranger's vehicle, stories are told where hitchhikers are mugged, raped or murdered. Without doubt, these unfortunate events have happened and will happen again, but with the proper precautions, hitchhiking can be as safe as any other form of transportation. This chapter aims to discuss the hazards involved in hitchhiking and how they can be minimized.

We start by analyzing official reports on the subject. Naturally by doing so, we can only break down the types of crimes conducted by, or against the hitchhiker, but cannot make statements about the likelihood of crimes happening in proportion to the total number of rides provided to hitchhikers.

3.1 Crime-related Studies on Hitchhiking

Surprisingly little studies have been conducted by local or federal authorities analyzing how hitchhikers have been part of crimes. The only study available to the public is a report by the Californian Highway Patrol from 1973, conducted between May 1 and October 31, entitled "California Crimes and Accidents associated with Hitchhiking". It is a response to the inquiry by the Senate of the State of California as follows:

"[...] conduct a study of crimes and accidents caused by or associated with hitchhikers. The study should specifically include all incidents where: (1) accidents have been caused by a vehicle in the process of picking up or discharging a hitchhiker on the freeway or on or near a freeway entrance or exit ramp; (2) crimes have been perpetrated by hitchhikers; and (3) crimes have been committed by other persons and the hitchhiker is the victim." (1973: Senate Resolution 18)

The Operational Analysis Section of the Department of the California Highway Patrol has received a total of 662 reports from law enforcement agencies throughout California:

Category	Number of Reports	%
Crimes committed by hitchhikers	275	41.5
Thereof with victim (e.g. theft)	123	18.6
Thereof without victim (e.g. narcotics)	152	22.9
Crimes with hitchhikers as victim	312	47.1
Other	75	11.4
Total	662	100

Table 1: Crime-related reports

Category	<14	15-19	20-24	25-34	>35	n/a	\bar{X}
Crimes committed by hitchhikers							
with victim	0.86	19.83	46.55	25.00	1.72	6.04	23yrs
without victim	9.27	42.38	23.18	13.25	3.26	8.66	21yrs
Crimes with hitchhikers as victim	5.32	49.17	26.58	9.97	5.31	3.65	21yrs

Table 2: Age of hitchhiker by event in percent

Category	male	female	n/a
Crimes committed by hitchhikers			
with victim	86.21	12.07	1.72
without victim	74.83	22.52	2.65
Crimes with hitchhikers as victim	49.83	48.84	1.33

Table 3: Gender of hitchhiker by event in percent

If one assumes that female and male hitchhikers are equally likely to be involved in a car crash, the collected data then suggests that between nine and twelve percent of the hitchhiker entity are females. However, as table 3 shows, crimes against hitchhikers are evenly distributed over both gender, so conclusively, female hitchhikers are seven to ten times as likely to be the victim of crimes than males.

Category	0-3	3-10	10-20	20-50	50-150	150-500	>500	n/a
Crimes committed by hitchhikers								
with victim	43.97	12.07	6.03	3.45	3.45	5.17	6.03	19.83
without victim	7.95	1.32	2.65	6.62	13.23	18.54	21.19	28.50
Crimes with hitchhikers as victim	40.53	9.87	9.30	8.97	5.98	7.64	5.65	12.15

Table 4: Distance covered (in miles) at the time of event in percent

More than half of the crimes with victims committed both by and against the hitchhiker were registered within the first ten miles of the trip. In contrast, over half of the crimes without a victim involved, such as being a runaway child, possession of narcotics or failing to carry identification, have come to an officer's attention beyond fifty miles covered.

Category	14-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	>55	n/a	\bar{X}
Victim of crime	13.79	25.00	21.55	9.48	10.35	3.45	16.38	30yrs
Perpetrator of crime	11.30	33.22	33.22	8.97	2.66	1.66	8.97	27yrs

Table 5: Age of motorist by event in percent

When comparing to table two, motorists involved in crimes are distinctly older than their hitchhiking counterpart, which can be explained due to the fact that the average motorist is older than the average hitchhiker.

Category	male	female	n/a
Victim of crime	87.93	12.07	nil
Perpetrator of crime	98.01	0.33	1.66

Table 6: Gender of motorist by event in percent

Category	<14	15-19	20-24	25-34	>35	n/a	Total
Theft	0	1.35	2.02	0.34	1.01	0.34	5.05
Robbery	0.34	11.45	8.42	4.38	4.04	0.67	29.29
Assault	0.34	3.03	3.03	0	0	0.67	7.07
Kidnap	0.34	0.67	0.34	0	0	0	1.35
Rape	0.67	1.35	0.67	0.34	0	0	3.03
Attempted Rape	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Molesting Children	1.01	1.01	0	0	0	0	2.02
Indecent Exposure	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	2.02	0	0.34	0	0.34	2.70
Total	2.69	20.88	14.48	5.39	5.05	2.02	50.51

Table 7.1: Crimes committed against male hitchhikes by age in percent

Category	<14	15-19	20-24	25-34	>35	n/a	Total
Theft	0	0	0.67	0	0	0	0.67
Robbery	0	1.01	1.01	0.34	0	0	2.36
Assault	0.34	2.36	1.01	0.67	0.34	0	4.71
Kidnap	0	1.68	1.01	1.35	0	0.34	4.38
Rape	1.01	14.14	5.72	1.01	0	0.34	22.22
Attempted Rape	0.67	6.40	2.36	1.35	0	0	10.77
Molesting Children	0.34	0.67	0	0	0	0	1.01
Indecent Exposure	0	1.35	0	0	0	0	1.35
Other	0.34	1.35	0.34	0	0	0	2.02
Total	2.69	28.96	12.12	4.71	0.34	0.67	49.49

Table 7.2: Crimes committed against female hitchhikes by age in percent

"Nearly all the crimes against females were sex related. Even those classified as assaults or kidnappings often appeared to have sex as a motive." (1974: California Highway Patrol - "California Crimes and Accidents associated with Hitchhiking", VII B)

Well over half of the sex related crimes committed against female hitchhikers have been carried out without weapons as means of coercion:

Gender (hitchhiker)	None	Hand/Foot	Knife	Gun	Other	n/a	Total
Male	13.13	12.80	8.08	10.44	4.04	2.02	50.51
Female	20.20	11.45	5.72	7.74	3.03	1.35	49.49

Table 8: Weapons used against hitchhiker by gender in percent

↓Perpetrators	Hitchhikers →	One	Two	Three	n/a	Total
One		44.85	4.98	1.99	0	51.83
Two		24.92	4.98	0	0	29.90
Three		9.30	1.33	0.33	0	10.96
Four or more		3.32	1.66	0	0	4.98
n/a		0	0	0	2.33	2.33
Total		82.39	12.95	2.33	2.33	100

Table 9: Number of motorist perpetrators and hitchhiker victims in percent

Apparent in table nine is the radical drop in criminality against a single hitchhiker (82%) in contrast to multiple hitchhikers traveling together (15%). Hitchhiking with someone vastly increases safety and is therefore rightly recommended.

Studying the tables presented above allows us to get an overview on the crimes involved with hitchhiking in relation to gender and age of perpetrators and victims as well as the types of crimes committed and what means of coercion have been applied.

Even so, because it is a difficult task to raise data on the number and demographics of hitchhikers not involved in crimes, no statements can be made on the general hazardousness of hitchhiking:

"It is not possible to conclude whether or not hitchhikers are exposed to high danger. However, the results of this study do not show that hitchhikers are over represented in crimes or accidents beyond their numbers. When considering statistics for all crimes and accidents in California, it appears that hitchhikers make a minor contribution." (1974: California Highway Patrol - "California Crimes and Accidents associated with Hitchhiking", XI)

3.2 Perception of hazardousness of hitchhiking

Naturally, hitchhiking presents a unique set of hazards that is different from the dangers of any other form of transportation. Before entering a stranger's vehicle, one must accept that there is no schedule, no goal nor destination other than the ones the motorist sets, and therefore the hitchhiker has to be prepared to intervene should it prove to be hazardous for him.

However, simply because the motorist holds a certain amount of power over the hitchhiker doesn't mean he always abuses it. This unrealistic perception of hitchhiking being extremely dangerous is based on exaggerated reports by journalists, Hollywood movies as well as the natural tendency to fear the unknown and is completely out of touch with reality.

As Gaye Tuchman suggests in her book "Making News" (1978), events covered in media are published not because they are important from an impartial point of view, but because the journalist expects his readers to show interest in the story. It is only natural that a young girl

who was raped and murdered while hitchhiking causes a greater sensation than a hitchhiker who successfully made his way from Berlin to Barcelona without trouble. Therefore, negative reports on the subject of hitchhiking are disproportionately high compared to positive, which leads to the bias described in the next paragraph.

As the following data (raised from female students enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in 1971) shows, interviewees who say hitchhiking involves a "great deal" of danger are by trend the ones who don't hitchhike and can therefore be nowhere near as competent and knowledgeable on the subject as the ones who hitchhike frequently.

"The percentage of women who report hitchhiking alone to involve a "great deal" of danger is as follows: 60% of those never hitchhiking, 57% of those hitchhiking only with others, 28% of those hitchhiking infrequently alone, and 3% of those hitchhiking frequently alone."

(1973: Greenley James & Rice David - "Female Hitchhiking")

However, it is common for participants in potentially dangerous activities to downplay the risks. A study conducted by Doka, Schwarz & Schwarz (1990) shows that scuba divers, when confronted with reports of fatalities, tend to accuse the casualties of errors of judgment and lack of skill rather than acknowledging the dangers. It serves as a method of danger neutralization and justifies the continuous participation of the interviewee in the activity.

Having belittled the hazards of hitchhiking previously, by no means do I want to suggest that there is no danger. The following guidelines have been proven useful to many hitchhikers.

4 Security

Methods to increase hitchhiker security can be divided into three phases: pre-boarding, boarding and post-boarding.

4.1 Pre-boarding

Pre-boarding methods aim to help creating a danger assessment of the motorist. The most common one is starting a dialogue, asking questions and analyzing the driver's reactions. Slurred speech, avoiding eye contact and open alcohol containers in the car could indicate intoxication. Based on those observations and common sense, the hitchhiker has to decide whether or not to accept the ride. Turning down a ride is not proof of cowardice, but awareness and intelligence - the next opportunity will eventually come.

4.2 Boarding

Storing backpacks and other belongings within reach and eyesight significantly reduces theft. If not applicable, keep the most valuable items (such as wallet and passport) on your body. Rear doors may have child locks and cannot be opened from the inside, so prefer the front passenger's seat. This also allows for more freedom in choosing means of coercion should worst come to worst.

4.3 Post-boarding

By conversing with the motorist, the hitchhiker gathers potentially valuable information about him and gets a picture of his character. However, this picture may just be a masquerade designed to lure the victim into trusting him. Therefore, always stay alert to a certain degree. Refrain from talking about potentially upsetting subjects such as religion and politics, especially at the beginning of the trip. As a female, never talk about sex related topics.

If you feel unsecure or threatened at any time of the trip, ask the motorist to drop you off. If he refuses, do not panic and consider your next steps carefully.

Unless evident, find out why he refuses and, if the case, what kind of crime he is trying to commit. Try to de-escalate the situation. Speak in a confident tone and hide your fear. Do not attack the driver if the vehicle is in motion, it will most likely result in a situation out of your control or in a crash.

Once the perpetrator stops the vehicle, take action. Depending on the type of crime, the weapons available to you and your attacker, your experience in using them as well as environmental factors, either obey or resist. Keep in mind that you don't know the motorist, he may be willing to go to extremes to achieve his goal. If weapons are available to you, do not threaten unless you are mentally ready to use them.

Whether you obeyed or resisted, report the crime to the responsible authorities as soon as possible.

Conclusion

Even though hitchhiking presents a unique set of hazards, hitchhikers are believed not to be over represented in crimes or accidents beyond their numbers. The perception of hitchhiking being extremely dangerous is unrealistic and based on biases and prejudices. As with any potentially hazardous activity, risks can be minimized by taking the proper precautions.

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