

[back to article](#)



Unlicensed, uninsured may have role in increased hit-and-runs

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OCALA - McNish Hampton was sitting in his trailer home earlier this month, playing football on his Xbox.

His fiancée of four years, Donna Jean Burch, was late arriving home from her job at the KFC on North Pine Avenue.

The 42-year-old had ridden her bicycle into work, just a short mile away, and should have been home by now.

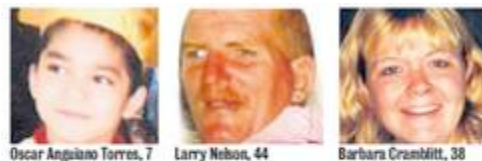
Just an hour earlier, Hampton, struck by a sudden sense of unease, had walked the short distance up the dirt path of the Edgewood Mobile Home Park where it meets Northwest Gainesville Road — a paved, two-lane road where the posted speed limit is 45 mph—in hopes of seeing the reflectors on Burch's bike approaching in the distance.

Something just hadn't felt right.

So, after returning home in the early morning hours of Dec. 12, he heard a sharp knock at the door. It wasn't his fiancée but two Florida Highway Patrol troopers.

Burch had been hit by a vehicle and the driver had fled, troopers said.

"I asked them what hospital she was in," Hampton, 32, recalled last week, by



Oscar Anguiano Torres, 7 Larry Nelson, 44 Barbara Crenbitt, 38



Edward Clark, 46 Donna Jean Burch, 42

SPECIAL TO THE STAR-BANNER

These are victims of fatal hit-and-run accidents in Marion County this year. No photo of Jahmi Thomas, 8, of West Palm Beach was available.

the side of Northwest Gainesville Road where the accident occurred—less than a half-mile from the mobile home park. "And they said, 'She's not in the hospital.?'"

"I just stood there, speechless. I went back in and sat and cried for two hours," he said. "It didn't seem real. It didn't seem real at all."

There were no clues at the accident scene as to what type of vehicle struck Burch, who was thrown 150 feet by the impact. She was not wearing a helmet.

On top of his grieving, Hampton is tormented by the fact that the driver, for whatever reason, never bothered to stop.

"That's just wrong," he said, his shoulders stiffening. "They should have at least stopped and seen who she was, or checked on her. There's some good people around here like that.

"But some people are not like that."

A mother of four, Burch became the most recent hit-and-run fatality in Marion County, which has seen at least five other cases this year, including two involving children.

Compared with last year, during which there were a handful of hit-and-run injuries but no fatalities, this year has seen a staggering rise in a type of crime that is as dumbfounding to the community as it is to the law enforcement officers patrolling the roads.

Cpl. Mark Weber, of the Florida Highway Patrol, estimates that about half of the calls into his office are "Signal 3's," or hit-and-run alerts, classified as any incident in which a person flees a scene after causing injury or damage to a person or structure.

"In this county, it seems every other call is a hit-and-run, whether it's a \$2 wreck, or a \$20,000 wreck or a \$200,000 wreck," he said.

Florida consistently has the third-highest rate of hit-and-run accidents in the nation, according to statistics compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration between 2003 and 2007.

In those four years, the state averaged 3,300 hit-and-run accidents per year, surpassed by only California and Texas.

Local authorities point to the rising number of uninsured or unlicensed drivers in

the area, combined with general reckless driving, especially in remote, rural areas, as reasons for the large number of hit-and-runs.

"Very rarely do we have a case where we have a hit-and-run accident that causes damage where [the driver] has a clean record and insurance," said Lt. Michael Thomas, a 22-year veteran of FHP.

With the holidays now approaching, Thomas expresses concern about the potential for more frequent DUIs and drivers who "don't take time to understand what they did."

"They wake up the next morning wondering why their car is damaged," he said.

Seized by panic

Why the number of hit-and-run fatalities has spiked this year is a mystery, leaving experts wondering whether it's somehow related to the poor economy, or whether it's simply a demonstration of the most basic levels of human nature.

Thomas, for one, believes there is a connection to the economy.

"There's got to be a correlation," he said. "People don't want to go to jail. They want to go to work, make money."

Still, he adds, "It's a sad state of affairs when you can't tend to your fellow man or woman."

Weber boils it down in simpler terms: "Lack of conscience, total disrespect and no human decency," he offers. "It takes a conscience to come [clean]; or their friend, who sooner or later they run their mouths to, to turn [them] in."

Whatever the root causes, experts say hit-and-run drivers share something in common: They are seized by panic and flee the scene rather than face the consequences.

Jason Melton, a Spring Hill defense attorney who represents individuals in traffic-related cases, believes leaving a crash scene involves some type of conditioned response.

"They panic. They freak out, and they drive to a friend's house or they drive home. It's not because they're irresponsible people. It's because they just panic. It doesn't say anything about their character, it says something about their nerves," he said.

One hit-and-run driver from Ocala agreed.

The 23-year-old woman said she was driving home from work one evening in February 2007 when another driver ran a red light and the two cars collided. Instead of staying behind, the woman drove home "in a daze," not knowing the other driver was hurt and required two stitches above her eye.

"When it happened, it was just such a shock," she said. "I just felt so guilty that I went back [the next day to the Ocala Police Department]. "It was horrible and it was all because I panicked and I was stupid."

She received two years of probation from a judge for leaving the scene of an accident with injuries.

Another Ocala woman, Kelli Stovall, was driving her 1998 Ford pickup on County Road 200A in the early morning hours of Sept. 24, 2005, when she struck and killed 27-year-old Eugene F. Gallipeau and injured Ashlee Morrison, then 18, who were walking along the side of the road with a third person, who escaped injury.

Stovall left the scene but turned herself in to the Florida Highway Patrol office the next afternoon after learning through word of mouth that there had been a fatality.

"I was completely out of my mind. I thought my whole life was over," Stovall, 41, said recently. She pleaded no contest and recently completed a 21-month term at a state correctional facility.

Experts concur that stress and anxiety are heightened during threatening situations and drive certain people to act in a way they wouldn't otherwise.

"In a moment of panic, our cognitive processes are not working very well. After a period of time, when that panic subsides, we can once again think clearly," said Deborah C. Beidel, a professor of clinical psychology and the director of University of Central Florida's Anxiety Disorders Clinic.

It's when that panic subsides, Beidel says, that one's environment comes to play a large part in influencing our decisions.

"Learning to accept responsibility is something we learn," she said. "It's not necessarily innate in any of us. It's a social value, a cultural value. It's a way we learn to behave."

And so it was with Curtis Taylor, Jr.

It was early in the morning on March 4, 2007, when the 21-year-old took his family's 1993 Buick LeSabre out to visit his child. After attempting to drive across West Silver Springs Boulevard, he struck motorcyclist Milagros Corchado, who was thrown onto the pavement by the impact.

Terrified, Taylor, who did not have a driver's license, fled to his mother's home a few blocks away.

"My child was not himself when it happened. He was so out of it," Herlaine Taylor, 46, recalled recently.

Taylor's father took him back to the accident scene to turn himself in. Corchado was flown to Shands at the University of Florida, where her left leg eventually was amputated.

"That's how we raised him," his mother said. "When you've done something wrong, face what you have done."

Taylor is now serving a 30-month prison sentence in a state correctional facility.

Stiffer penalties

For some families of hit-and-run victims, no apology or expression of sympathy can fill the void left behind by the death of a family member.

Ramanbhai Patel, 73, was struck and killed by a vehicle while out taking a stroll near his daughter's home around Southwest 30th Street in October 2006. The driver, Robert L. Hicks, did not stop but turned himself in the next day after reading about the incident in the newspaper.

Hicks told authorities he thought he had hit an animal.

Kunal Patel, the victim's 22-year-old grandson, said Hicks reached out to his family in efforts to say he was sorry. Communicating through the police, "We [told him] we accept your apology, but we couldn't see him face to face," Patel said, adding his grandfather, who rarely left the family's property but had decided to take a walk that day, stood 5-foot-11-inches tall and had "a full head of white-gray hair."

Patel said he never questioned the truth of Hicks' statements to police, and that the family never considered pressing charges against the driver, who was 77 at the time.

"We're not going to make him go through hell. We're not going to put him

through anything," Patel said.

Changes in the Florida Statutes in recent years have addressed the rise in the number of hit-and-run accidents by increasing the seriousness of the related charge.

As of Oct. 1, 2006, leaving the scene of the accident with death became a first-degree felony, punishable by up to 30 years in prison.

On July 1, 2007, leaving the scene of an accident involving death in which a DUI was involved nets a two-year minimum-mandatory prison sentence.

Over the past four years, Chief Assistant State Attorney Ric Ridgway's office has prosecuted an average of 24 cases of leaving a crash scene. Ridgway stresses that running a person over, barring any impairment, doesn't necessarily result in an arrest.

"They might get a traffic ticket. But if they leave the scene, that becomes suddenly a felony," he said.

As Melton, the defense attorney, puts it, "The crime is not the accident; it's the leaving."

For those left behind by the death of a loved one, such as McNish Hampton, the memories remain vivid. And unlike a momentary episode of panic, pain is something that takes much longer to subside.

"I didn't even see this coming at all," said Hampton, of his fiancée's tragic accident. "I loved her very much, I really did.

"It's a cruel world," he sighed.

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