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## Rise in convictions linked to crackdown on motorists



[Victoria Weldon](#)

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CRIMINAL proceedings and convictions are up for the first time in seven years - with a police crackdown on motorists being linked to the increase.

Scotland's courts saw a four per cent rise in criminal cases in 2013/14, an increase of almost 5,000 proceedings, while the number of convictions also went up by four per cent.

A report released yesterday by the Scottish Government said the rise was "primarily driven" by an increase of more than 4,800 motoring convictions, linked to Police Scotland's "operational practice" over the year.

The figures have been welcomed by road safety groups, who say they point to a crackdown on law-breaking motorists who put lives at risk.

However, road traffic lawyer Graham Walker claimed Police Scotland's pursuit of lower level motoring offences risked damaging the force's relationship with the public.

Mr Walker said: "The rise in prosecutions is not a surprise to those of us who are at the coal face of the justice system, where we can see Justice of the Peace courts throughout the land being turned into de facto motorist courts because of the amount of low level motoring offences being prosecuted.

"It's all very well for government officials and senior police officers to tout road safety as the banner they raise when they go into battle against Scotland's motorists, but they need to remember that those same people are the ones who will be called for jury duty or as witnesses in more serious cases, the people who normally support our police wherever required.

"This pitiful police focus on low level motoring offences will drive a wedge between ordinary decent citizens and our police force."

The report showed that vehicle defect convictions were up by 30 per cent, while seatbelt offences increased by 24 per cent and speeding offences rose by 17 per cent.

However, convictions for driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs dropped by 14 per cent.

Police Scotland chief constable, Sir Stephen House, has been clear about his intention to crack down on motoring offences and introduced a specialist trunk roads patrol team when the single police force came into operation last year.

This resulted in "significant" increases in the number of driving offences, now being borne out in the number of convictions.

A spokesman for the AA said: "Police in Scotland have had a number of crackdowns on motoring offences and these figures appear to be reflecting that.

"It sends out a very clear message to drivers who might be tempted not to get their cars MOT'd or drive around in faulty cars, and also the ones who try their luck breaking the law, that the police in Scotland are a bit more proactive than maybe those in other parts of the UK and they shouldn't assume that they will be able to get away with it."

Road safety charity Brake also welcomed the report, saying it was good to see Police Scotland "taking a tough line on driving offences".

A charity spokeswoman added: "The increase in convictions should send a clear message to any drivers tempted to break the law that driving offences are real crimes, with real victims, and they will not get away with it."

Chief Superintendent Iain Murray, Police Scotland's head of road policing, said road safety remains one of the top priorities for Scottish communities.

He said: "We are committed to influencing road user behaviour and reducing the numbers of casualties on Scotland's roads and officers routinely deal with risk-taking behaviour that we know puts people unnecessarily at risk .

"A total of 172 people were killed on Scotland's road in 2013, more than three times the number that were murdered, and more than 1,600 were seriously injured.

"Many of these collisions were avoidable and officers take every opportunity to engage positively with road users, provide real-time advice and education and enforce legislation when necessary. This is all with the aim of preventing death and injury and making Scotland's roads safer

"When it comes to risk-taking, there is no such thing as a low level motoring offence, and the consequences of speeding, drink/drug driving, not wearing a seatbelt or using your mobile phone whilst driving can be catastrophic."