

It Is Possible to Reduce Accidents by 50% to Save 1.6 Million Lives, Prevent 200 Million Injuries in a Single Year

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Theme: [History](#)

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*The extent of the enormous distress caused day after day, year after year is often not realized. **One reason for this is that the incredibly huge number of occupational accidents suffered by workers are not considered in many counts of accidents and there is a widespread tendency to look at accidents mainly and sometimes only in terms of road accidents, although the number of other accidents taken together is much higher. Generally, at the level of research, data collection and policy making there has been a failure to take a comprehensive view of all kinds of accidents.***

Hence the huge potential that exists of saving human life and preventing painful injuries and disabilities from reducing accidents has been generally underestimated. In fact planning for accident reduction based on such comprehensive understanding of accidents has been rarely seen.

If on the other hand a comprehensive view of the challenge of reducing all kinds of accidents is taken up firmly and policy is formulated on this basis then it will be able to achieve very significant progress in most countries. Further if there can be a worldwide campaign for reducing accidents on the basis of such a comprehensive understanding, and if there can be adequate funding and international cooperation for this, then at world level truly significant prevention of deaths and injuries, including serious injuries and disabilities can be achieved. Millions of individuals and families can be saved from highly distressing situations and conditions every year.

According to WHO data 3.2 million deaths annually are caused by non-intentional injuries or accidents. (WHO—Injuries and Violence, 2021). It may be a surprise to many people to know that the number of deaths caused by various other accidents (falls, fire, poisonings, drowning, others) is almost one a half times the number of deaths caused by road accidents (1.9 million compared to 1.3 million).

What is more, the distress related to injuries caused by accidents may be even higher than accident related fatalities, given the very large number of serious injuries many of which result in disabilities. According to the International Labour Organization, while the number of deaths caused by occupational accidents in a year is 350,000, the number of workers involved in non-fatal injuries in a year is 313 million (ILO-Global Trends on Occupational Accidents, 2015). The injuries caused by road crashes annually are estimated at 20 to 50 million by the WHO. The total number of accident related injuries (including those from falls and fires) is over 400 million in a year.

Many accidental injuries can disable victims in very serious ways for almost the entire life. Several accidental injuries can be extremely painful, for the victims as well as those very close to them. This is particularly true of accidents involving burn injuries and accidents involving babies.

As many as about 400,000 people die in burn injuries in a year. In the age group 0-4 years, 47,000 children die in a year from burn injuries, about 57,000 die in road crashes and 58,000 die in drowning accidents. In the age-group 5-14, about 110,000 children die in a year in road crashes, 77,000 in drowning accidents, 27,000 from burning. Among those in the prime of their youth, in the age-group 15-29, around 336,000 die in road accidents and 85,000 in fires in a typical year (WHO factsheet on accidents)

Accident injuries are almost always very traumatic because by definition these occur suddenly and the entire life of an individual and a family can seriously fall out of place, for days or even weeks and months, sometimes years. These problems increase in poorer societies and in those with privatized health care systems because of difficulties in getting proper treatment, increasing the possibility of permanent disability.

As many accidents are caused by glaring negligence and violation of known safety norms, it should be possible by continuing, thoughtful, determined efforts to reduce accident related deaths and injuries by one-half. Hence this writer's estimate is that it **should be possible to save 1.6 million human lives and prevent over 200 million injuries in a year on this basis**, apart from avoiding economic loss worth billions. I have made this estimate by first taking the total number of accidental deaths and injuries in a year from the various data sources given above, and then calculating on the basis of the assumption that by a very well planned and efficiently implemented effort, it should be possible to reduce accidental deaths and injury by about 50% or so.

In fact there is hardly any other campaign which can yield such high achievement in terms of reducing deaths, distress and pain with a high chance of success compared to the campaign for reducing accidents. What is more, it is easier to achieve cooperation and to avoid disagreements among various countries in such a worldwide campaign, compared to other campaigns on more controversial issues. There is thus clearly the need for a very well-organized worldwide campaign to reduce all kinds of accidents.

The financial costs of accidents are also immense. This includes financial costs to the victims as well as financial costs to the authorities. Many families are ruined by accidents. Governments often incur very high expenses in providing medical care and other relief to victims, and in legal cases relating to accidents, apart from loss of any infra-structure. The economic losses reduced by an effective campaign to reduce accidents can also be many times more than the costs incurred in such a campaign, although of course its biggest gains would be in terms of saving human lives and reducing human injury, pain and distress.

The worldwide campaign being suggested here should seek to enhance the reach of those existing efforts which have already shown promise, while at the same creating a wider framework for integrating various sides of the effort, filling in the gaps, promoting learning from best practices and overall leading to a comprehensive worldwide accident prevention effort. While prevention of accidents should be the main focus of such a campaign, at the same time this campaign should also aim at significantly improving the availability of timely

and proper medical care to accident victims.

Such a campaign should seek a mobilization of people on accident prevention and at the time also seek to influence government policy on prevention issues. One priority can be to try to ensure that the government allocates more resources for accident prevention and uses it carefully to achieve best possible results, something that would be important in several countries having tight budget constraints. A specific proposal which can be useful in many countries may be to press for the creation of a National Accident Prevention Authority at the country level with provincial chapters. A national campaign can have linkages with other such campaigns in various countries with the spirit of sharing best practices and experiences. Media can play a very useful role in the success of such a campaign.

Such a campaign should make a special effort to help the poorer sections of society as they are much more at risk. A child from the lowest social class in the UK is 16 times more likely to die in a house fire than one from a wealthy family. Pedestrians, homeless people and footpath dwellers are often highly exposed to injury and death from speeding vehicles.

Perhaps the only good news to share about accidents is that these can be reduced to a very significant extent by careful planning and consistent efforts. As the WHO says,

“Evidence from many countries shows that dramatic successes in preventing injuries (including accident related injuries) and violence can be achieved through concerted efforts that involve, but are not limited to the health sector.”

Areas of intervention where significant success can be achieved more quickly include preventing drunken driving and preventing use of intoxicants before any kind of high risk work and implementing much better safety in factories and mines where accident rate is high. Safety campaign should be highly participative with close involvement of people. Despite the worldwide nature of the campaign and the keenness to learn from success stories elsewhere, the local realities and special situations should be always considered carefully in all initiatives.

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