
The High-Risk Roads of Israel

by

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When it comes to traffic accidents, the common attitude among drivers as they enter their vehicles is “it won’t happen to me”. The statistics would appear to support this belief. After all, the probability of becoming a casualty on any given trip is close to zero, so who cannot understand the feeling of complacency that engulfs individuals as they sit behind the wheel or walk across the street? The issue of traffic safety barely flickers, if at all, on the personal radar screens.

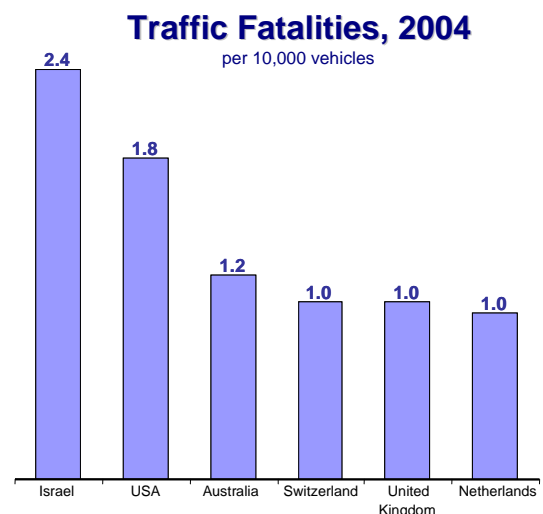
However, if one takes a step back and looks at the data from a different perspective, the probability picture darkens considerably. According to Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics, roughly 8,000 people were killed and over 600,000 were injured, more than 50,000 of these severely, on Israel’s roads during the years 1990-2005 – all this out of an average population of less than 6 million during this period. If these statistics will also characterize Israel in the future, then the probability that a person has of getting injured or killed in a traffic accident during the next decade and a half is 11%.

To illustrate what this implies for a family of five, the probability that at least one of the family members will become a casualty – and not just involved – in a traffic accident is 43%. The probability that one of the five family members will be killed in an accident during the next 16 years is close to one percent. These are no longer trivial odds. When one considers the extended family, then there is hardly a family in Israel that will not suffer a casualty from traffic accidents during the next decade and a half.

These statistics are not part of some pre-determined fate nor are they representative of many other countries. As is indicated in the graph, the number of fatalities per 10,000 vehicles in Israel is greater than in the United States by one-third. It is twice the Australian level and 2.4 times greater than in the Netherlands and in other countries.

What do these numbers mean? Had we lowered the number of traffic fatalities in 2005 to the level of the Netherlands, the lives of 266 people (60% of the 448 who died) would have been spared. Just think how many lives could have been spared over the last decade and a half. This could have been a completely different country.

How can we lower the number of traffic fatalities? First, it is possible – and necessary – to remove many people from the roads by building fast, available and cheap mass transportation systems. This is important also from the perspective of improving efficiency in the economy, lowering production costs and increasing output – with all of the positive implications that this has on raising living standards and reducing income disparity.



source: Dan Ben-David, Tel-Aviv University
data from Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and IRTAD (OECD).

When the focus turns to the risk associated with actual travel on the roads – that is, the number of fatalities per kilometer-traveled – the situation in Israel continues to look bad in comparison with other countries: 28% more fatalities than in the U.S., 50% more than in Australia and Switzerland, 56% more than the Netherlands, and 58% more than in the U.K. There is considerable room for improvement.

According to one of the leading researchers in this field, Prof. Ian Johnston, we need to “put five star people in five star cars on five star roads.” In other words, traffic safety education is critical, but it is only one variable in the equation. It is also important to switch to new vehicles that are designed and built to provide greater safety. And the third variable, infrastructure, plays a decisive role in completing the picture.

Despite the frequent inclination to place responsibility for an accident on the “human factor,” the time has come to redefine what this term actually means. When narrow road shoulders are constructed, when poles and trees are placed in close proximity to traffic, when sharp curves are built on intercity roads, when road markings are inadequate and misleading, when there is no serious enforcement of laws against the most dangerous traffic violations, then this is a “human factor” that must be addressed. Hopefully, the new National Traffic Safety Authority that is now being created will know how to identify and influence the entire human factor issue in a much more effective manner than we have been familiar with in the past.

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