



OFFICIALS MISLEAD AMERICA ABOUT HIGHWAY SAFETY

A recent New York Times article (Nov. 27) repeated the official line that the USA has fallen from first place to ninth, over the last 30 years, in the official rankings of highway safety between various countries, based on total mileage traveled. This claim is convenient for the Government because the situation still doesn't look too bad, but it conveniently ignores the fact that there are actually three parameters by which one can measure the effectiveness of highway safety. One of these other methods involves the actual proportion of the population that is killed each year and shows the USA to be in a dismal 24th position out of 28 countries. This release outlines the true situation.

([PRWEB](#)) December 5, 2003 --Being economical with the truth is a common political tactic and nowhere is this more the case than in the arena of US highway safety. Recent quotes published rather ironically on Thanksgiving Day make this deceit-by-omission very apparent.

The claim is that America, in the international rankings for road deaths in relation to distances traveled, has fallen from first place to ninth over the last thirty years. Yet this is only half the story and it gives a highly misleading insight. The figures are seemingly based on the International Road Traffic and Accident Database, administered by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Belgium. Yet the IRTAD actually gives two measurements by which death rates may be judged: deaths per 1 billion vehicle kilometres and a similar parameter to the figures used in the above claim and deaths per 100,000 population.

Is there a big difference? You bet there is. And surely the key criterion must be the actual number of people who are killed, not how many miles they can successfully travel before that tragic moment occurs.

It has long been internationally acknowledged that, statistically, the safest roads on which to drive are divided highways, whatever they are called locally and whichever country they happen to be in. There is, after all, generally no oncoming traffic to worry about, no pedestrians, no bicyclists, few serious curves, and the intersections are few and far between. Crashes on such roads, relatively speaking, are therefore quite rare. If the sheer size of the USA is taken into account, the importance of this factor starts to loom. The large distances between many American cities and towns undeniably affect the total number of miles traveled, but these are journeys that are usually undertaken on safer, divided highways, so deaths-per-mile statistics reduce accordingly.

Only a few other countries have such large distances as a factor. Canada, for example, has 1.42 million kilometres of public roads and Australia has 900,000 km, but both have a much lower population and a lower death rate, per capita, than the USA. The much smaller size of many of the other countries involved has the opposite effect: the roads have a much greater density of vehicles per mile, and this is likely to increase the number of crashes. From figures given in the IRTAD, one finds, for example, that the number of passenger cars and station wagons on Britain's roads is almost exactly the same, in proportion to the population, as is found in the USA. But Britain only has 396 thousand kilometres of roads, compared with America's 6.354 million kilometres. When these distances are converted to miles, the result is a potential density of 104 cars per mile of available road in the UK as opposed to a mere 32 in the USA.

The other parameter used in the IRTAD tables the deaths per 100,000 population gives an entirely

different perspective. The most recent figures available, for 2001, show that the USA had 14.8 people killed in road accidents for every 100,000 members of the population. The top two countries, Britain and Norway, each had a rate of 6.1 deaths. Indeed, Turkey is listed as having a rate of just 5.6 but given the lack of supporting data and that country's performance in the two previous years this would appear to be spurious. Yet now, all of a sudden, the USA shows herself to be about 2½ times worse than the best-performing countries and that certainly doesn't sound as acceptable as the difference in the quoted "deaths per 100 million miles traveled" - 1.51 in the USA vs. 1.2 in Britain - a mere 25% variation. How easy it is to sanitize tens of thousands of pointless deaths by reducing them to the lowest possible figures.

It is all just playing with math; statistics don't register as being dead bodies and untold grief. What it really means is that Britain, with a population of 59 million, lost 3,431 people in 2002 compared with 42,815 people killed on America's roads. The population of the USA at that time was 285 million, only 4.83 times greater than Britain's, and 4.83 multiplied by the UK death toll is 16,571. This would suggest that - if the USA could match the fatality ratios in Britain and Norway - over 26,000 American lives could be spared annually; just a little bit different to the 12,000 hitherto suggested. And even the 12,000 is indicative of dreadful failures to correct this situation.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. Several other factors affect death rates, but from an American perspective the most saddening fact is that the countries that have a lower (i.e. more acceptable) death rate than the USA are often ones with additional dangerous factors, such as higher overall speed limits, much smaller cars (which are less protective in crash situations), and a much lower proportion of divided highways.

Dr. Jeffrey W. Runge, administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is quoted in the New York Times as saying "We've got the safest vehicles in the world, so when you consider where we fall in the scheme of things, we can't blame the vehicles."

When asked about Dr. Runge's comments, Tim Hurd, NHTSA's Chief of Media Relations, said "I don't believe Dr. Runge was talking about cars manufactured in the USA as opposed to cars made in other countries. His point was that low seat belt usage and drunk driving are the things that make the difference."

But build quality and design represent an extremely important aspect of highway safety. History shows that automakers in several other countries have constantly held the lead in vehicle safety and still do - most notably Volvo, in Sweden, and Mercedes, in Germany. Honda is hot on their heels, too, with new crash testing facilities, both in Japan and Ohio. The list of safety advantages that non-US cars have over American-made cars is very long. Apart from protective engineering standards, it includes many seemingly minor yet truly important things like compulsory yellow rear indicator lights, rather than red ones that not only don't utilize the safety benefits of contrasting colors but also take away 50 percent of brake light efficiency when in use. High-intensity, red rear fog lights are another example. In Europe they are effectively a standard fitting and are used in matched pairs so that distances may be gauged in very poor visibility, yet in the USA they are usually fitted only to European-made cars and - ludicrously - are in some states only permitted singly, rather than in pairs, so that they "cannot be confused with brake lights." Do legislators truly not comprehend that in thick fog, falling snow or heavy road-spray it is being seen that is crucial, not whether the lights in question might be confused with brake lights? The fact is that on many fronts the USA does not manufacture the safest vehicles in the world and many more examples could be used to illustrate this.

It is fashionable, these days, for those with an engineering bias to claim that driver education plays little part in highway safety and that vehicle and road design are the most important factors, but in another recent article the



American automotive journalist Eric Peters accurately identified a key problem when he wrote: "Lack of skill — not speeding — is the fountainhead of America's traffic problems. If you disagree, then you've got to explain how it is that the Germans routinely drive much faster than we do, yet, miraculously, have lower overall accident and fatality rates.

"Go to the head of the class if you guessed the Germans' — luck is due to more-demanding licensing requirements and skills testing — not anything special about the Germans themselves.

"It takes a lot to get a first-time driver's license in Germany — as much as 25-45 hours of Fahrschule instruction, on the road, in a real car — culminating in an extensive written and practical test. The cost to pay for the necessary schooling (at an approved Fahrschule) and so forth runs about \$1,500-\$2,000. They don't mess around. As a result, the road competence of the average German driver is much higher than that of the average American driver.

"Almost anyone (including a 10-year-old) can pull a lever from — Park — into — Drive — and get a vehicle rolling — and that's about all we demand of people [in the USA] before issuing them a valid operator's permit. That and a quickie written test that even Forrest Gump could pass.

"If we spent more time and energy on fostering better driving — rather than licensing just about anyone who can walk unaided into a DMV office — we'd almost certainly have fewer accidents..."

The American public should ask themselves why they are only getting half of the information and being told that the situation is reasonably good when, in fact, America is faring very badly in terms of highway safety and countless thousands are dying as a direct result. Down from first place to ninth? The more telling truths are that the USA is actually in 24th place out of 28 listed countries in the IRTAD, and the US death toll is currently the equivalent of the World Trade Center massacre being repeated every twenty-five days.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

The writer, Eddie Wren, is a former traffic patrol police officer from the UK and a specialist in highway safety issues. He is now the executive director of the New York-based "Drive and Stay Alive, Inc.", a not-for-profit organization dedicated to reducing deaths on America's roads, particularly among teens and twenties drivers. More information about him may be found at: www.driveandstayalive.com/info%20section/bios/about-the-editor.htm

SOURCES:

-- Original article, to which this one responds: New York Times; November 27, 2003 viewable at:

www.nytimes.com/2003/11/27/national/27SAFE.html

-- IRTAD URL: www.bast.de/htdocs/fachthemen/irtad/english/we2.html

-- Tim Hurd's (NHTSA) comments were made in a telephone conversation with Eddie Wren, Dec 1st.

-- The quote from Eric Peters has been checked by him and is used with his full permission

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