American Scientist

Flying Versus Driving

Letter to the Editor, 91(2), March-April 2003

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To the Editors:

The central point of Sivak and Flannagan's article in the January-February issue "Flying and Driving after the September 11 Attacks" is on target – flying is generally much safer than driving. An important contributor to the higher risk in driving is that US road-safety policy has inappropriately devoted so much focus on increasing survivability when crashes occur, as described in my article "**Traffic Crashes**" in the May-June 2002 issue. Airline safety has improved so dramatically by correctly focusing on preventing, not surviving, crashes.

I do think the article overstates the admittedly large differences in risk between flying and driving. For distances for which there is a choice, the flying is likely on small aircraft operated by commuter airlines. These aircraft, and airlines, have higher fatality risks than large jets flown by major airlines. Commuter airline casualties were excluded from the fly versus drive comparison.

All passengers on an airlines flight have near identical risks, whereas driving risks vary enormously between drivers. A typical driver killed is a drunk unbelted 19-year old male driving at illegal speeds an hour or so after midnight. Typical airline passengers (and typical *American Scientist* readers) have personal profiles markedly different from those of drivers killed in traffic, and accordingly have far lower than average driving risk. Risks in driving, and also in flying, are however substantially higher than many other risks (tornadoes, chemicals, nuclear power) that attract much attention and resources.

Leonard Evans
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Click here for photograph of airline occupancy on 9/11, 2002

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unrelated Department -- but they pursued an idea together on an informal basis). Is described in Obituary for Professor Beloff (PDF).

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American Scientist

Flying Versus Driving

Letter to the Editor, 91(2), March-April 2003

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To the Editors:

The central point of Sivak and Flannagan's article in the January-February issue "Flying and Driving after the September 11 Attacks" is on target – flying is generally much safer than driving. An important contributor to the higher risk in driving is that US road-safety policy has inappropriately devoted so much focus on increasing survivability when crashes occur, as described in my article "**Traffic Crashes**" in the May-June 2002 issue. Airline safety has improved so dramatically by correctly focusing on preventing, not surviving, crashes.

I do think the article overstates the admittedly large differences in risk between flying and driving. For distances for which there is a choice, the flying is likely on small aircraft operated by commuter airlines. These aircraft, and airlines, have higher fatality risks than large jets flown by major airlines. Commuter airline casualties were excluded from the fly versus drive comparison.

All passengers on an airlines flight have near identical risks, whereas driving risks vary enormously between drivers. A typical driver killed is a drunk unbelted 19-year old male driving at illegal speeds an hour or so after midnight. Typical airline passengers (and typical *American Scientist* readers) have personal profiles markedly different from those of drivers killed in traffic, and accordingly have far lower than average driving risk. Risks in driving, and also in flying, are however substantially higher than many other risks (tornadoes, chemicals, nuclear power) that attract much attention and resources.

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Click here for photograph of airline occupancy on 9/11, 2002