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The Greatest Risk Your Child Faces

By Leonard Evans, DPhil

Sandy Hook Elementary School was the subject of massive headlines highlighting the terrible tragedy that occurred there. A deranged gunman killed 20 children age 7 years or younger. In response to this and other shootings, schools and communities have fortified their efforts to make schools safer. Yet parents are still anxious about sending their children to school.

But there is a far greater tragedy in our country that does not grab headlines, despite killing vastly more children than school shootings. In the two years since Sandy Hook, more than 1,000 children 7 years or younger have been killed in traffic crashes on the nation's roads. The victims were mainly passengers in family cars, but more than 200 were pedestrians.

The nation's attention is now focused on faulty ignition switches on GM vehicles from model-year 2000 onwards. It is claimed that 38 deaths were "associated" with the faulty switch. But there were not just 38 deaths in GM vehicles in 2000-2012, there were 130 thousand! Yes—130,000 people (drivers plus passengers) were killed travelling in GM vehicles. Almost none of these deaths have anything to do with vehicle engineering, defective or otherwise. The huge number of deaths reflects the number of GM vehicles that were on the roads and how they were driven, and not the safety of the vehicles.

The 130,000 total includes the deaths of 2,641 child passengers age 7 years and younger. All of these deaths resulted from drivers behaving in ways that increase the

risk of crashing. Such behavior is determined mainly by public policy—a government responsibility.

The United States has failed abysmally in discharging this responsibility. While many other countries have cut their traffic deaths by far more than half, U.S. progress in improving traffic safety has been stuck in first gear. Part of the reason for what I have called "The Dramatic Failure of U.S. Traffic Safety Policy" is that our government focuses on relatively unimportant factors, while leaving little energy for the important ones. The U.S. government gives us a daily dose of toxic misinformation by stressing vehicle defects, crash-test results, and safety equipment. These play a role, but it is a minor one compared to what is really important: how drivers drive.

Since the government is not taking reasonable steps to protect your children from the greatest risk they face, you must take effective steps yourself. The most important factor that you can immediately control is how the family car is driven.

Speed is the most critical factor. The faster you drive, the greater your risk of crashing. If you crash, the faster your speed, the greater the risk of injury to everyone travelling in your vehicle (and in any vehicle you hit). If injuries do occur, the faster the speed, the more likely they are to kill. Small reductions in speed produce very large reductions in risk.

I am horrified at parents who take 10 minutes to make sure their child is properly restrained in an ap-

proved child seat, and then violate traffic laws. Speeding and other types of reckless driving enormously increase the risk of crashing, whereas child seats, belts, and airbags just reduce the severity of injury, or risk of death, after crashes occur. In 2012, 16,769 drivers were killed, essentially all of them "protected" by airbags.

The discussion above has been about deaths in traffic crashes. Death is the most clearly determined outcome of a crash; yet for every death, there are about 40 injuries. Injuries vary from minor scrapes and bruises to total paralysis of arms and legs. If you see a young man in wheelchair from which he will never rise unassisted, it is very likely that it was a traffic crash that put him there.

The message is clear. First, never be involved as an "at-fault" driver in a crash. This is easy to achieve: stay alert, pay full attention to driving, and obey traffic laws. Second, never be involved as the "not-at-fault" driver. This requires allowing sufficient safety margin to absorb the misbehavior of others.

Your family safety is much influenced by the behavior of other drivers. Many institutions influence driver behavior, including the entertainment industry, the news media, the insurance industry, the automobile industry, and the alcohol beverage industry. We need more pressure to shame these institutions into not glorifying behavior that kills people, including children. But the main responsibility remains with government. It must tell the

public what is important, even if this does not generate election-campaign contributions.

So remember, by far the greatest threat to your child is not school shootings but being a passenger in a car. You can provide more protection to your child by simply allowing a little more time for travel, obeying traffic laws, paying strict

attention to driving, and above all else, slowing down.

Leonard Evans is an internationally renowned traffic safety expert with a doctorate in physics from Oxford University, England and membership of the National Academy of Engineering. He has presented traffic-safety lectures, including 22 Keynote Addresses,

in 30 of the 58 countries he has visited, and has received just about every award available for traffic safety research. His 197 publications include Traffic Safety and the Driver (1991) and the distinctly different Traffic Safety (2004). Both books have received rave reviews and been repeatedly called classics. Traffic Safety is used in more than 50 countries.

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