

Injuries kill over 20 000 children a year in developed countries

Jason O'Neale Roach *BMJ*

Injury accounts for almost 40% of annual deaths in children aged 1 to 14 in the world's most developed nations, says a new report by Unicef released this week.

Traffic accidents, intentional injuries, drowning, falls, fires, poisonings, and other hazards kill more than 20 000 children aged under 15 every year. This makes preventable injuries the principal cause of child death in developed nations.

Peter Adamson, one of the report's authors, said: "Over 500 children, anonymous to most of us, died from accidents this year [in the United Kingdom], but their families are just as bereaved as those of high profile murder cases." Deaths from traffic accidents account for 41% of all child deaths by injury, and boys are 70% more likely to die by injury than girls.

The report presents a standardised league table of child injury deaths per 100 000 children between 1991 and 1995 for nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), using mortality data from the World Health Organization.

Sweden and the United Kingdom have the best records on child safety, occupying the top two places of the 26 country league table, with Sweden having just over five child injury

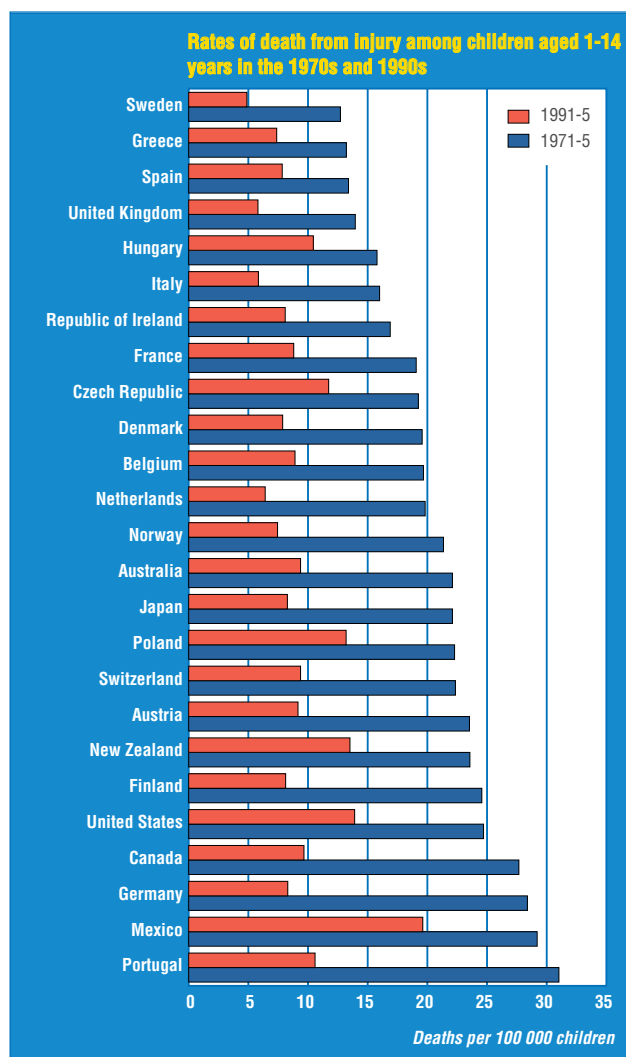
deaths per 100 000 children. The bottom two places are occupied by Mexico and South Korea, with rates three to four times higher than the leading countries. The United States and Portugal have rates twice as high as the leading countries.

Unicef estimates that at least 12 000 deaths a year could be prevented if all OECD countries had the same child injury death rate as Sweden. Dr Elizabeth Towner, a contributor to the report, warned: "We need more research to see what effect decreased deaths has had on disability."

The number of child deaths by injury in OECD nations fell by about 50% between 1970 and 1995. In 16 cases countries more than halved their child injury death rates over this period. Peter Adamson said: "It is very evident that the [OECD] countries have been progressing at very different speeds." He emphasised that "steep reductions are not the result of a magic wand, but of policy."

Despite good overall performance, the United Kingdom has shown a clear disparity between the rich and poor sections of the population. □

Innocenti Report Card No 2: A League Table of Child Deaths by Injury in Rich Nations is available at www.unicef.org/uk



Child deaths from injuries halved between 1970 and 1995, but some countries moved faster than others. Australia and New Zealand, for example, started with similar rates, but by the mid-1990s Australia had cut its rate by 60%, while New Zealand's fell by only 40%

Pneumonia, cholera, and dysentery feared after earthquake

Rohit Sharma *Mumbai*

More than a week after the worst earthquake in India's history devastated Gujarat in western India, hundreds of thousands of Indians are struggling to cope with its after effects.

With buildings unsafe and dangerous to live in, thousands are forced to live outside, exposed to chilling winter temperatures and in unhygienic conditions. They now face the

threat of disease.

A large number of hospitals and nursing homes have been destroyed, and many operations had to be carried out in the open after the earthquake.

It is still uncertain how many people died in the earthquake, but India's defence minister, George Fernandes (under whom the armed forces have been carrying out rescue operations) has stated that the death toll could reach six figures, making it perhaps the worst earthquake in history.

Bob McKerrow, head of the regional delegation for south Asia of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, said that from the societies' wide experience, 50 000 deaths would seem a reasonable estimate.

Tens of thousands of people are feared trapped under the rubble, and hope of finding survivors has largely faded now, although foreign rescue teams with heat sensing equipment and sniffer dogs are still looking for them.

More than 50 000 people received injuries of various sorts—mostly orthopaedic—as a result of buildings falling on them. A huge number now have amputated limbs, following serious injuries.

In Bhuj, the epicentre of the earthquake, which measured 6.9 on the Richter scale, 90% of buildings were seriously damaged and 10% were completely destroyed.

Many villages were completely destroyed. To add to the continuing psychological and

physical trauma of the affected individuals, powerful aftershocks are continuing—more than 19 of these have registered over 5 on the Richter scale, with hundreds of smaller ones.

"A large number of people are getting exposed to cold, and they might get pneumonia and respiratory infections," said Dr Vijay Kumar, director of communicable diseases with the World Health Organization's South East Asia regional office in Delhi. "We are also worried about dysentery, cholera, and typhoid fever outbreaks now," he added.

According to the Red Cross and Red Crescent, although there is a fear of epidemics, only a small number of cases of diarrhoea have been reported so far. □