**PUBLIC RELEASE: 28-JUL-2016**

Likely to be many more pedestrian and motorcycle deaths in India than officially stated

*Researchers and policy makers should steer clear of government stats in this area, authors urge*

There are likely to be many more pedestrian and motorcycle deaths in India than official government figures state, suggests research published online in the journal *Injury Prevention*.

Police reports of the actual toll of road traffic injuries differ substantially from official statistics, the study shows, prompting the authors to urge researchers and policy makers to steer clear of government stats on this topic until the problem has been fixed.

India's official statistics on road traffic injuries between 2001 and 2014 report that pedestrians comprise fewer than 10% of deaths--unusually low for a country where walking is the most common means of transportation, say the researchers.

In India, traffic police are responsible for investigating road traffic collisions. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) collects police reports from across the country and collates these to produce the official statistics for road traffic injuries.

In a bid to test the accuracy of these figures, the researchers reviewed police reports of road traffic deaths in one large district of India (Belgaum, Karnataka) in 2013 and 2014. The reports are known as First Information Reports, or FIRS for short.

These were then compared with the official stats from the NCRB, and large discrepancies emerged.

For example, official statistics for Belgaum reported that only 9% of deaths were among pedestrians, but the FIRs showed that in reality pedestrians comprised more than double that--21%.

Similarly, official government statistics reported that 37% of road traffic deaths were among motorcyclists, but the FIRs showed that they comprised almost half at 49%.

It isn't clear why these discrepancies exist, say the study authors. And it could be that government figures focus on the offending vehicle, which would automatically preclude cyclists and motorcyclists as they are rarely assigned fault.

The study is based on one district, but reporting procedures are similar to those used in the entire country. The findings therefore suggest that India's official statistics on road traffic deaths are likely to be unreliable, with pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists underrepresented, while vehicle occupants are overrepresented, conclude the authors.

But because these figures are widely quoted in media reports, policy debates, and academic research on road safety, "they have the potential to substantially misdirect road safety efforts in India. Furthermore, because of India's large population, they threaten to bias global policy discussions as well," they write.

"Until the national reporting has been fixed, researchers and policy makers should not use official tabulations for understanding the epidemiology of types of road users killed in traffic crashes," they warn.

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