

Almost 1.3 million a year die on roads

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Almost 1.3 million people are killed and between 20 and 50 million are injured each year on the world's roads, according to the first comprehensive global report on road safety.

And half of those who die or are hurt are not in cars, but are "vulnerable road users" such as pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists, the study from the World Health Organization shows.

Margaret Chan, director-general of WHO, said that while much progress has been made in keeping people safe in cars, "we are not giving sufficient attention to the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. ... We must do better if we are to halt or reverse the rise in road-traffic injuries, disability and deaths."

In much of the world, there is a glaring lack of safety legislation and enforcement of the rules of the road, Dr. Chan said.

While road-traffic death rates in most high-income countries have stabilized or declined in recent decades, the new research shows road deaths have increased markedly in the developing world.

While the developing world is home to just under half the world's vehicles, it accounts for more than 90 per cent of road deaths.

The report also estimates that, if trends continue unabated, road-related deaths will increase to 2.4 million a year by 2030.

The study documents the number of registered motor vehicles in 178 countries and outlines actions being taken to

invest in public transport and encourage non-motorized travel such as walking and cycling. (There are just over 20 million motor vehicles in Canada.)

Vehicle manufacturing standards and requirements for road-safety audits were also reported, as well as the existence of formal pre-hospital care systems, including emergency telephone numbers.

While the inadequacies of Canada's 911 system have been highlighted recently, the WHO report found that there are 90 different emergency numbers around the world, and recommends some form of standardization.

Etienne Krug, director of the department of violence and injury prevention and disability at WHO, said accurate statistics are crucial for understanding the state of road safety and measuring the impact of efforts to improve it.

The 301-page report contains a wealth of data.

For example, the highest road-related death rates are seen in the eastern Mediterranean and African regions. The lowest rates are among high-income countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden and Britain.

Other highlights of the report include:

» Fewer than one-third of countries meet basic criteria for reducing speed in urban areas.

» Fewer than half of countries use the WHO-recommended blood-alcohol concentration limit of 0.05 grams per decilitre as a measure to reduce drunk driving. (In Canada, the limit is 0.08.)

» Although helmet laws exist in more than 90 per of coun-

tries, only 40 per cent have a law that covers both riders and passengers while also requiring that helmets meet a specified standard.

» Only 57 per cent of countries have laws that require all car occupants to wear seatbelts. This figure is only 38 per cent in low-income countries.

» Half of all countries do not have laws requiring the use of child seats. This figure masks considerable variation, with relevant laws in 90 per cent of high-income countries but only 20 per cent of low-income countries.

» Only 15 per cent of countries have comprehensive laws addressing all five of the risk factors listed above.

Dr. Krug said there are other safety measures that need to be put in place, particularly for pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists, such as building more sidewalks, raised crossings and separate lanes for two-wheelers, as well as reducing drunk driving and speeding.

The Global Status Report on Road Safety was financed by the Bloomberg Philanthropies, the charity umbrella of Michael Bloomberg, New York's mayor and a billionaire entrepreneur.

Mr. Bloomberg said the report is important because it highlights that road crashes are the leading cause of death in people aged 5 to 44.

"For the first time, we have solid data to hold us accountable and to target our efforts.

Road safety must be part of all transport planning efforts, particularly at this moment of focus on infrastructure improvements and road building by many countries around the globe," he said.