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The Rising Global Health Crisis No One Is Talking About

Motorcycle fatalities are claiming the lives of a third of people driving in Asia—but governments don't seem to notice.



A young family on a scooter in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. (Photo: Getty Images)

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Bio



Motorcyclists can seem invincible as they dodge and weave their way through traffic and zip down alleyways. But beyond a motorcycle's quick and convenient capabilities is a dark story: a developing global crisis of road fatalities.

Motorcycles account for approximately one-third of all road deaths in Asia, according to the World Health Organization—a number that will only increase and a problem *Foreign Policy* has labeled a “health crisis” in its [recent feature](#). The number of motorcycles on the road is expected to double every five years, and traffic accidents overall in developing countries are on track to [claim more lives than HIV/AIDS or tuberculosis in the next decade](#), according to PBS.org.

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Call them scooters, mopeds, motorbikes, or

whatever you like, two- and three-wheeled vehicles are taking the world by storm. Since the 1950s—in accordance with booming production by large auto companies such as Honda and Ford—motorcycles have become increasingly popular. This year, 95 million motorcycles will be manufactured (compared with 80 million cars), with predictions of 135 million for 2016; the numbers are a huge leap from just 10 million in 1950.

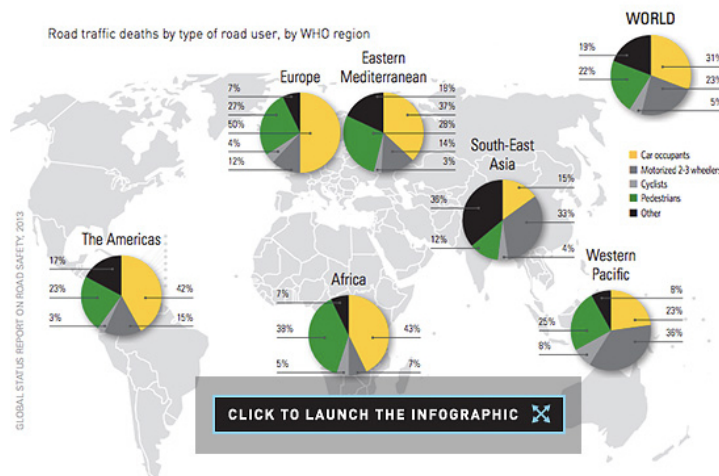
Riding a motorcycle is a convenient and inexpensive way to get around, but in certain parts of the world—namely, Asia—the rules of the road do not apply. In Vietnam it's not uncommon to see a family of four squeezed onto a motorcycle for one, and it doesn't help that 80 percent of helmets in the country are deemed unsafe. Motorcyclists pulled over for violations in Cambodia can often get out of a ticket by simply paying the officer, even if they don't have a license (and the majority of riders don't apply for a license). All the while, motorcycle crashes account for roughly 67 percent of road deaths in Cambodia, and the numbers reach 74 percent in Thailand and Laos, *Foreign Policy* reported.

Still, Asian governments don't seem to notice the looming problem. In Cambodia, HIV/AIDS-related deaths equate to 2,300 per year, and the government allocates \$58 million to combat the disease—but 2,000 deaths are caused by highway fatalities, with the government allocating only \$10 million, according to WHO. Road crashes also cost Southeast Asia's economy between 2 and 3 percent in annual GDP, according to the World Bank, likely owing to health insurance, property damage, or the loss of male breadwinners. So why the disconnect?

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(Infographic: Courtesy World Health Organization)

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One reason could be that many people aren't raising the issue because of their cultural or religious beliefs. For example, practicing Buddhists see road-related accidents as karma, and followers don't generally protest. "If a robber kills somebody, we are outraged. If people are dying of AIDS, we demand the government do something," Tairjing Siriphanich, a Bangkok road-safety activist, told *Foreign Policy*. "But if your son or husband or brother dies on the road, we accept it: 'It was his fate, his destiny; it was his time to die.'"

There's also a lack of data; accurate reporting of motorcycle deaths worldwide is slim, and some countries [underreport](#) or keep inaccurate statistics.

Though government initiatives are under way—Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni signed a [new set of road safety laws](#) earlier this month—whether they will be enforced remains to be seen. Progress could also come from individuals who step up to curb the epidemic—including an entrepreneur in Vietnam who started a helmet business with the sole mission of getting [helmets on every man, woman, and child](#).

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