

Road accidents biggest health crisis

POLICY FOCUS

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If we go by the number of deaths, the coronavirus is not the country's biggest health public health problem. Road accidents are.

Since the coronavirus hit the country early this year, the pandemic had claimed 60 lives as of mid-September, thanks to all-out preventive measures nationwide. The coronavirus deaths in the past six months are about the number of road casualties in just one day.

Thailand's roads are the deadliest in Southeast Asia and among the worst in the world, according to the World Health Organisation. About 20,000 people die in road accidents each year, or about 56 deaths a day.

Despite a myriad of government measures to reduce road casualties, they show no sign of abating.

To save lives, we need a systematic and comprehensive database to establish the causes of road accidents accurately. Such comprehensive and correct road accident data is key to effective road safety measures to reduce road deaths.

At present, different state agencies are compiling information about road accidents separately. These organisations include the Royal Thai Police, the Office of Insurance Commission, the Public Health Ministry, the Ministry of Transport, and many other local organisations. Since they have different purposes, how they define the information they are gathering is different. For example, traffic accident costs. For the Department of Highways, this term means the damage incurred to its properties only. For the Public Health Ministry, the damage means medical expenses from the accidents. For the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation, the

term covers the damage incurred to state assets, private properties, and medical costs.

With such a fragmented information system and different definitions of what they are looking at, there is no common database for sharing across all state agencies.

To fix this problem, the Department of Disease Control, Public Health Ministry, has created a more integrated database on road fatalities from three databases. First, death certificates and other official documents reporting deaths. Second, the police database on traffic crash reports. And third, the e-claim database system on road deaths compensation, mostly from motorcycle crashes.

So far, this is the country's most extensive database on road deaths. Yet, it is far from sufficient because it still does not cover the number of injured people, the causes of accidents, and driver behaviour.

Since road safety is on Thailand's national agenda, a comprehensive database on all the factors involved is essential for policy formulation and the investment in effective measures to reduce road accidents.

To fill the gap, the Thailand Research Development Institute and Asia Transportation Research Society have teamed up in a joint study to identify major causes of road accidents. Entitled "Understanding and Analysing Accident Data", the study uses the databases that are scattered across various state agencies such as police stations, hospitals

and local administrative units. We then use an application to process the information to find the factors that cause accidents and their severity.

Generally, road accidents occur from three causes: human error, the vehicles and the roads. From the 833 cases in our study, we have found that the main cause of road accidents involves road factors such as road safety equipment, road slopes, warning signs and road signs. Meanwhile, poor surfaces and bad weather are the environmental factors that worsen the severity of the road accidents.

Still, this study is too limited because the traffic crash reports are incomplete. For example, there is very little information about driver behaviour, so much so that it is not possible to analyse how the driver or driving behaviour is related to two other accident factors — car and road conditions — as the cause of accidents.

The country's accident database system needs significant improvements. For starters, it needs to have sufficient data on driver behaviour. It also needs to operate as an integrated system that can connect with other agencies dealing with road accidents. This inter-connected and comprehensive system will uncover other factors that cause road accidents, leading to more effective policy and preventive measures to curb road fatalities.

In a nutshell, we need an integrated and standardised database system on road accidents that can be used across all agencies involved. This database



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system is necessary for the National Road Accident Prevention and Reduction Policy Commission to meet its goals more effectively.

The Department of Disease Control has spearheaded change by developing a more integrated database system on road accidents. Yet the system faces hurdles from incomplete traffic crash reports and different meanings of the terms used in the databases as well as their different standards on compensation. The concerns over the privacy of individuals involved also prevent state agencies from sharing their database with others.

But the e-government mechanisms under the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA) can provide a way out.

The Royal Decree on the Establishment of the Digital Government Development Agency (Public Organisation) 2018 has given the DGA the authority to standardise state information, to import the database from other state agencies and integrate inter-agency databases that include their knowledge bases and budgets.

As an intermediary, the DGA can facilitate the processes to integrate road accident databases from different state agencies. As a result, each car crash report will feature complete information about driver behaviour, injuries, medical treatment, road conditions, environmental factors and compensation — all in the same database system.

This integrated system is in line with the country's policy drives to create e-government. It will reveal the causes of car accidents in full, enabling policymakers to hit the right targets and effectively reduce road accidents and casualties.

Short of this comprehensive, interconnected database system, the roads in Thailand will likely remain among the most deadly in the world.

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