
Dana P. Loomis, MSPH, PhD

Introduction

Motor vehicles cause more fatal occupational injuries in the United States than any other agent.1 Previous studies providing data on this problem have focused on single states or selected occupational groups,2-6 but this investigation, using death certificate data from the National Center for Health Statistics, was undertaken to provide a description of the overall epidemiological pattern of motor vehicle-related fatalities in the United States working population to be used in planning future research and prevention efforts.

Methods

The subjects of this study were residents of 20 states (Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, and Wisconsin) who died in 1986 or 1987. Only these states coded occupation and industry data from death certificates and reported them to the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) in at least one of those two years. Occupation and industry coding are done by the states according to the 1980 US Census Bureau occupation and industry classification system.7

Subjects were selected from 1986 and 1987 mortality data tapes from NCHS. All 5,031 men and 1,776 women 15–64 years old who died of injuries received as drivers or passengers in crashes of motor vehicles other than motorcycles (coded E810-E825 with 4th digit equal to 0 or 1 according to the International Classification of Diseases, 9th Revision), and who had an occupation other than “student,” “volunteer,” “never worked,” or “retired” on the death certificate were selected as cases. A control group of 7,167 men and 4,369 women was formed by selecting a 5 percent simple random sample of deaths from all causes other than motor vehicle crashes from the same NCHS tapes using restrictions identical to those applied to the cases.

Standard case-control odds ratios were computed by treating each occupational category in succession as the “exposed” group, and all other categories combined as “unexposed.”8 The odds ratios can be interpreted as the ratio of the observed number of motor vehicle crash fatalities in each occupational category to that expected based on the experience of all others.8 Age-adjusted odds ratios were estimated by the Mantel-Haenszel method, and test-based confidence intervals were computed for both the crude and adjusted estimates.8 Because female homemakers were the largest single occupational group, they were considered separately using all women with employment outside the home as the unexposed referent, but were excluded from all other analyses involving women.

Results

Occupation

Crude and age-adjusted odds ratios for motor vehicle crash fatalities by occupation are shown in Table 1. Without adjustment for age, men in white collar occupations had more than twice the number of fatal crashes than those with blue collar occupations. The odds ratio of motor vehicle crash fatalities for men in white collar occupations were 2.6 (95% confidence interval 1.9–3.6) as compared to those in blue collar occupations. Women in white collar occupations had a higher odds ratio of 2.3 (95% confidence interval 1.4–3.8) compared to women in blue collar occupations.

An increase in age-adjusted odds ratios for white collar occupations was noted for all age groups. The odds ratio for men aged 15–24 years who worked in white collar occupations was 1.4 (95% confidence interval 1.0–2.1) compared to those in blue collar occupations. For men aged 25–44 years, the odds ratio for white collar occupations increased to 2.1 (95% confidence interval 1.5–2.9), and for men aged 45–64 years, the odds ratio was 3.2 (95% confidence interval 2.3–4.3).

Among women, age-adjusted odds ratios for white collar occupations increased with increasing age. For women aged 15–24 years, the odds ratio was 1.5 (95% confidence interval 1.0–2.3), and for women aged 25–44 years, the odds ratio increased to 2.1 (95% confidence interval 1.4–3.0). Women aged 45–64 years had an odds ratio of 3.2 (95% confidence interval 2.2–4.5).

Address reprint requests to Dana P. Loomis, PhD, Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, CB 7400, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7400. This paper, submitted to the Journal August 31, 1990, was revised and accepted for publication February 19, 1991.
Occupations, except for technicians and related workers, tended to have essentially the expected number of crash deaths or somewhat fewer, whereas most blue collar occupations had a small excess of deaths. With age adjustment, “extractive” occupations (miners and oil well drillers), and transportation and material moving occupations had the highest odds ratios, with 1.8 and 1.6 times more deaths than expected, respectively. Executives, managers, and salesworkers had more modest excesses of deaths.

For women employed outside the home, some of the largest excesses of vehicle crash fatalities occurred in occupations with relatively few deaths, notably construction trades, transportation, agriculture, and the military. Odds ratios were also elevated, although to a generally lesser degree, in more populous categories, including managerial occupations, professional specialists, and technicians. Female homemakers had very low crash mortality compared to women with paid employment.

**Industry**

Odds ratios indicating the association of motor vehicle crash deaths with Census Bureau industry categories are shown in Table 2. Among men, most industries had essentially the expected number of crash deaths. However, the categories of transportation, communication, and utilities and wholesale trade had 40 percent more deaths than expected when adjusted for age.

Construction, followed by transportation, communication, and utilities, were the industrial categories with the largest excesses of crash fatalities among women employed outside the home, with about three and two times the expected number of cases, respectively. The more modest
excess of deaths among women in the finance, insurance, and real estate category may be more quantitatively important given the larger number of deaths in that group. Public administration and personal services are populous categories with substantially fewer deaths than expected. Crude and adjusted odds ratios tended to be similar except for the military category, for which the odds ratio declined sharply with adjustment for age.

Discussion

This 20-state mortality study describes patterns of motor vehicle crash fatality for men and women by occupation and industry. Such information has not been available before for a geographically diverse population including a wide spectrum of occupations. The vital statistics data used in this study offer several advantages for identifying groups of workers at increased risk: death registration is complete, comparability of data between cases and noncases is assured, and large studies including many states and all occupational groups can be done at minimal cost. On the other hand, studies of this type share generic limitations of design and data quality which have been discussed elsewhere.9-11

The major interpretational challenge of this study is that the data do not allow injuries which occurred while the decedent was working to be distinguished from those which occurred during other activities. To minimize the proportion of non-workers in the study, only individuals ages 15 to 64 years with an identifiable occupation indicated on their death certificate were included. However, deaths due to injuries which did not occur at work were also necessarily included, because the states do not report to NCHS the death certificate field that identifies on-the-job injuries.10 A field coded for the place of injury (for example, industrial place, home, or farm) is available from NCHS public data, but it does not appear to effectively distinguish occupational injuries.12

Although it would be helpful to separate injuries which occur on the job from those taking place elsewhere, the ability to do so is not central to all potential uses of these data. The present analysis based on occupational groups also approximates the socioeconomic pattern of motor vehicle crash mortality. In addition, the data are relevant to injury prevention efforts, because some programs directed toward workers, like the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s proposed workplace driver training program,13 have the potential to reduce injury risk both on and off the job. The accuracy identification of mortality excesses due to on-the-job hazards remains important for more specific interventions, such as equipment modifications, however.

In spite of some disadvantages, the data used in this study appear to be sensitive enough to capture previously observed excess vehicle crash mortality among transportation workers.2,6 This should lend some confidence to the interpretation of the occupational patterns of mortality which emerge from these data. Comparison of the crude and age-adjusted odds ratios may also be useful for interpreting the variation in mortality among different groups of workers: the adjusted odds ratios should most accurately reflect the inherent hazardfulness of a job, while the crude measures are also sensitive to the sociodemographic composition of the workforce.

Because of the large number of injuries and deaths due to the use of motor vehicles in work, these hazards should be a priority for injury research and prevention. This study suggests that further investigation of managers and other seemingly low-risk groups, in addition to transportation workers, might be warranted. However, the availability of appropriate data remains an obstacle. Uniform coding of the death certificate indication of injury at work and its inclusion in NCHS public mortality data would improve future surveys based on those data, but studies using more detailed information on individuals and vehicles used for work are also needed to identify factors which could be modified to prevent motor vehicle injuries to workers.

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References