

Safety Corner

Is crossing the street safe?

Statistics show that the chance of a pedestrian being killed in a traffic accident in Hong Kong is about one in 15,000 each year. Does it mean that everyone will face the same risk whenever they cross a street? Definitely not. The statistical figure is an average value covering all streets, all accidents and the general population; the risk of getting killed when crossing a street is different for every person and for every street. The risk will go up for a street with cars running at high speed and down for a quiet street and when one has carefully checked traffic from all directions. Whilst one may judge a 1:15,000 chance as small, no one will cross a street while being blindfolded. This is because the risk also depends on our behaviour when crossing a street, statistical figures do not give the risk for a particular situation.

How risky is 1:15,000? It is safer than five hours of solo rock climbing, where the chance of getting killed is about 1:100. It is more dangerous when compared to the risk of being killed by a fire or gas explosion at home, which has a chance of about one in a million each year.

The assessed risk of someone getting killed due to radiological release from a nuclear meltdown is about one in a million each year for nuclear power plants of non-Soviet design; there is no statistical figure available as there has not been any fatality yet. However, the general public dislikes nuclear power due to its perceived fatality risk. There is nothing unusual about disliking one kind of hazard more than another as people have their own views and feelings in matters. However, we should be able to come up with a consensus when two activities are presented with risk figures - one that shows a higher chance of death is the one that is less safe.

If you consider a one-in-a-million chance of getting killed each year to be high, should we ban pedestrians from crossing streets?

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The Safety Corner is contributed by Ir Dr. Vincent Ho, Past Chairman of the Safety Specialist Committee.