ROAD TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY BASED ON KURUNEGALA DISTRICT

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Introduction

Road traffic accidents, which are generally unintended and preventable, are a common risk every day to life. In general, about twenty million people die or become injured due to traffic accidents each year nationwide. World Health Organization (WHO) strategy of 2001 reports that the numbers of deaths resulting from road traffic crashes have been projected to reach 8.4 million in the year 2020. Further, it reports that currently road traffic injuries are the leading cause of deaths and injuries, the 10th leading cause of all deaths and 9th leading contributor to the burden of disease worldwide based on disability adjusted life years. According to Police reports and Traffic Police Center (TPC) of Sri Lanka, due to road accidents there are more than 06 deaths reported in Sri Lanka. The National Transport Medical Institute reported that 15% of the victims that meet with accidents results in a disabled status annually. Therefore, no doubt that problem of road traffic accident is increasingly becoming a threat to public health and national development in many developing countries (Norman, 1962, Komba, 2006). It might contribute to poverty by causing deaths, injuries, disabilities, grief, and material damages.

The TPC reported that the problem of road traffic accident was on the increase for the last few years. In 2012 the total number of road accidents that had occurred was 61,587, and out of the total 3,645 (5.92%) accidents were reported from Kurunegala district. Despite the fact that the development of road systems and transport is an important factor in social-economic development, road accidents account for high death rates in the country and pose a threat to public health and developmental

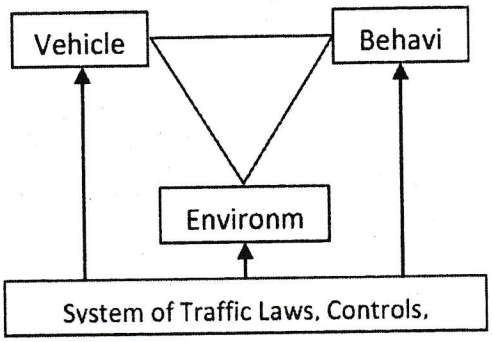
progress in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this research has focused to investigate and identify factors contributing to high rates of road traffic accidents in Kurunegala District.

Methodology

The procedure employed for data collection in the field was based on the theoretical framework proposed by Jørgensen and Abane (1999). Interviews, focus group discussions, observations and review of secondary data, were done accordingly. Four factors contribute towards traffic accidents in this model include driver's behaviour, quality of vehicle, environment and system of traffic laws, controls, and regulations. Driver behaviour reflects the driving skills and driving style which mirrors attitudes and traffic risk perception of a driver. Vehicle factors include aspects such as its design, lighting system, break system, tyres and its use. In this context, the environment is the physical setting which includes various climatic threats and geo hazards like heat, fog, high winds, rain, and flooding. System of traffic laws includes government policy regarding road safety issues in the country.

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches have been used to collect the primary data from 156 respondents, who have met with an accident in the period from July 2013 to December 2014 in Kurunegala district, through interviews with the accident victims. Primary data was collected using a questionnaire which contained both close ended questions for yes or no answers and set of predefined answers like Likert scale. The data collected from the respondents was analyzed by using a statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) *version 17*.

Figure 1 : A model for traffic accidents



Source: Jørgensen and Abane (1999)

Experimental results

The results shows that the "*behaviours*" of drivers in 'at fault' motor accidents given a prominence (Mean 4.62) impact on road traffic accident, and it follows by the "*environment condition*" (Mean 3.12), and the "*quality of vehicle*" (Mean 3.01). When the driver's behavioural factor is taken into account, respondents admitted that both driving skills and driving style can caused for accidents. Most of them admitted that the negligence caused the accident. Particularly, overtaking in risky situations was

found to be the main cause for road traffic accidents and it accounted for 78 out of the 156 accidents. The questionnaire respondents admitted to regularly passing vehicles, sometimes two or more at the same time. Unsurprisingly, the considerable amount of questionnaire respondents (23.7%, n = 37) claimed that they met with the accident when a cell phone is used while driving, because it distracts the attention of the driver, leading to car accidents.

As per the literature, traffic accidents are caused mainly by the drunken drivers. Most of these scholars argue that, driving under intoxication might increase driver's self-confidence but impairs his driving performance. Interestingly, alcohol-related accidents were found to be rare. The study has shown that alcohol was only a factor in a total of 3.2% (n = 05) of accidents investigated by the researchers.

The results shows that the average age of drivers responsible for motor accidents is between 21 to 30 years, and this is significantly higher than the group 31 to 40 years ($t=3.56$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the young drivers are found to be another cause of accidents on the road in Kurunegala district. Some younger drivers cause fatal accidents, because of immaturity and lack of experience.

It is clear from this research that any initiatives in road traffic safety should address the behaviours of both drivers and other road users.

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