

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Assessing risks

The horrific shootings of children at a Texas elementary school on May 24 reignited a national debate about how to protect students in school.

Then, two days later, here in Pottstown, a catastrophic explosion on Hale Street killed four Pottstown students and their grandmother in their own home. No cause has been announced.

Dramatic incidents such as these are widely reported, making it difficult to properly assess all the risks we face in life.

Average life expectancy in the U.S. is currently 78.6 years. Life expectancy had been steadily increasing since the 1920s until the Covid pandemic, which has prematurely killed more than 1 million Americans. Many Covid deaths could have been avoided by wearing masks and being inoculated once vaccines were developed, but a significant proportion of Americans choose not to do so.

People are concerned about murders, but homicides cause a very small portion of all deaths — about one half of one percent of all deaths last year. And most homicides result from domestic disputes, bar fights, drug dealing, and other underworld activities.

More than twice as many people — about 46,000 — died from suicide than from homicide last year.

The overwhelming number of American deaths are from disease.

Less than 7 percent of fatalities occur from accidents, and because of ever-increasing safety measures, the number of accidental deaths dropped in half between 1950 and 2000.

Since then, the accidental death rate has risen, dramatically, because of drug overdoses, which are now the leading cause of unintentional death. Overdoses killed more than 100,000 Americans last year, the highest number ever.

Of course, this is a risk that can be avoided by not taking drugs.

Until the soaring increase in drug overdoses, traffic fatalities had been the No. 1 cause of accidental deaths in the United States. Traffic fatalities peaked at 56,000 in 1972. Since then, engineering improvements in both cars and roadways, including the widespread use of seat belts, has

reduced traffic deaths to 42,000 in 2020. This is in spite of more people driving, and many more miles driven.

But the risk of being killed in a car accident has a lot to do with gender and location. Males are more than twice as likely to be killed in a car accident than females, and rural dwellers are almost three times more likely to be killed in a car accident than those in urban areas.



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

It is more than twice as dangerous to drive at night as in the day. Per mile driven, cars are about 20 times more dangerous than buses, railroads, or scheduled airlines, but less dangerous than small air-

planes.

You are almost 20 times more likely to die in a car accident than to die in an accident at home.

The most common risky behavior among Americans is smoking. If you smoke a pack of cigarettes or more per day, you are 17 times more likely to get lung cancer than a non-smoker, 12 times more likely to get esophageal cancer, 11 times more likely to get emphysema, and almost twice as likely to get heart disease.

Being an alcoholic reduces your life expectancy by 12 years, and it also harms others by increasing the chance of accidents and homicides.

Obesity shortens people's lifespans. Being overweight by 20 percent increases your risk of heart disease by 29 percent, cancer by 10 percent, stroke by 15 percent, and diabetes by 130 percent.

Do you want to increase your lifespan? Get married!

Married people live about five years longer than single people. But those widowed and divorced have a shorter life expectancy than those who were never married. A widowed man is about 50 percent more likely to die of heart attack and stroke than a married man, and 140 percent more likely to commit suicide.

Poverty poses perhaps the greatest risk of premature death. Living in a poor area of an American city reduces life expectancy by about nine years, irrespective of race.

Much has been written about pollutants in the ground, air, and water, but these have a negligible effect on life expectancy compared to the other risks discussed in this article.