

What's Killing Us?

BY **ANONYMOUS**

The author has spent four years in India working among FPGs, and eight years with the INSIGHT program (Intensive Study of Global History and Theology) based at WCIU.

Editor's Note: *There is no greater sorrow than seeing a loved one die. A bridge of compassion and gospel witness between mission workers and the unreached and Frontier People Groups has often been built by helping them escape the very things killing them and their families. This author seeks to clarify four leading causes of untimely death worldwide today, three of which are fully preventable. Other articles address solutions.*

Should We Accept All Deaths as Part of God's Plan?

"If only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy. If millions die, that's only statistics." —Joseph Stalin

"Only statistics." It's a morbid sentiment but, in a way, Stalin was not wrong. People tend to ignore issues they see as too big to be addressed. Studies have shown many people who would otherwise donate time or money to a humanitarian cause are much less likely to do so when presented with statistics detailing how widespread the problem is.¹ But we must keep in mind that no problem is too big for God, even one killing millions of people every year. As the bearers of the Good News to the least reached frontiers of the world, we recognize that part of that good news is that many causes of suffering and death can be stopped. We can share our hope in the power of Christ to stop this suffering in a world without hope.

Our confidence in the power of God over death is well founded in both Scripture and history so we sometimes

¹ cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.uoregon.edu/dist/6/6757/files/2014/07/Whoever-Saves-One-Life-Saves-the-World-1wda5u6.pdf

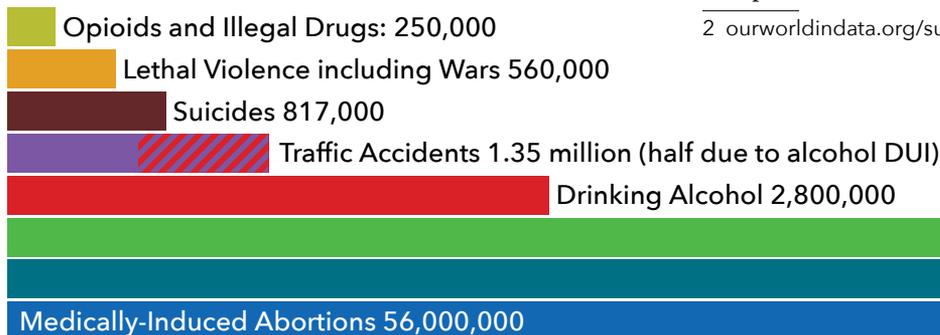
forget death is still an enemy. Some Christians come to accept death as inevitable, even in cases when it isn't, thereby discounting death as a factor in human suffering. I once knew a young Christian whose mother had recently died of cancer. The prevailing words of comfort they had received from their church were "It's sad, but your mother's death is a part of God's plan." The young person was depressed enough by this to consider suicide (0.7% of all deaths are suicides).²

« Many causes of suffering and death can be stopped. »

Once I traveled to a closed country with an experienced missionary. We were visiting a tribe known for wearing brightly colored clothes; however, in their camp everyone was wearing black. Invited into the main tent for dinner, our team's leader asked the assembled tribal leaders why they were not wearing their traditional brightly colored garb. They explained that the patriarch of the tribe, the local leader's uncle, had died the week before and they were in mourning. Without missing a beat, our leader replied, "Unlike you, we believe in Jesus Christ. So, when our loved ones die, we celebrate, because we know we will see them again." Technically true, perhaps, but not very compassionate.

² ourworldindata.org/suicide

Annual Global Deaths



Every People Group Fights Death

Death is something almost everyone in every people group doesn't want to happen, especially not to their loved ones. With global health organizations already pursuing their own agendas in tracking global trends of deaths, for the first time in history believers have access to a global picture of what is really killing humanity. Mission workers have increasing opportunities to understand the sin patterns of a culture and how it is destroying its people. Globally, the majority of deaths are not caused by outside circumstances like natural disasters or disease, but by human choice. As we work out what it means to "love our neighbor as ourselves" we should carefully consider the forces that drive our brothers and sisters and their friends and families into the arms of death prematurely.

« The majority of deaths are prematurely caused NOT by outside circumstances like natural disasters or disease, but by human choice. »

How Death Statistics Obscure Causes

Douglas Adams wrote "It's not the fall that kills you; it's the sudden stop at the end." Most global mortality databases only look at the "sudden stop." Death certificates list as the leading causes of death things like cardiovascular diseases, cancers and respiratory disease. But they give very little insight into the behaviors or actions that led to the death. Was the respiratory disease caused by years of smoking or by the air in New Delhi? Was the cancer caused by standing too close to the microwave or by drinking wine?³

³ www.cancerresearchuk.org/about-cancer/causes-of-cancer/alcohol-and-cancer/does-alcohol-cause-cancer

Behaviors, conditions, and circumstances that most frequently result in death are called "risk factors." The leading risk factors tracked in global deaths are: high blood pressure (10.44 million), smoking (8.32 million), high blood sugar (6.53 million), high body-mass index—obesity (4.72 million), outdoor air pollution (2.94 million) and alcohol use (2.84 million.)⁴

This type of categorization also has flaws. For example, if you are smoking and drinking while speeding away from police and you drop your cigarette into your vodka which lights your car on fire which then causes you to crash and die, was the death caused by smoking, alcohol use, fire, road accident, or police intervention? Frequent overlap confuses the causes, and some deaths may even be counted twice, so the numbers are not exact.

Deaths Due to Bad Choices

Of these risk factors, two stand out in particular. While many behavioral, genetic and dietary factors can lead to obesity or high blood pressure, *smoking tobacco* and *consuming alcohol* are both specific activities. Let's take a detailed look at these two activities alongside two others; *medically-induced abortion*, which is widely ignored in death statistics, and *lethal violence*, which is widely reported globally and thus holds a prominent place in the public imagination of the causes of death. Lethal violence uniquely shares a quality with abortion—namely that the deaths in both cases result from values and beliefs that lead to the conclusion that killing another person will somehow improve your situation.

Fighting Untimely Deaths

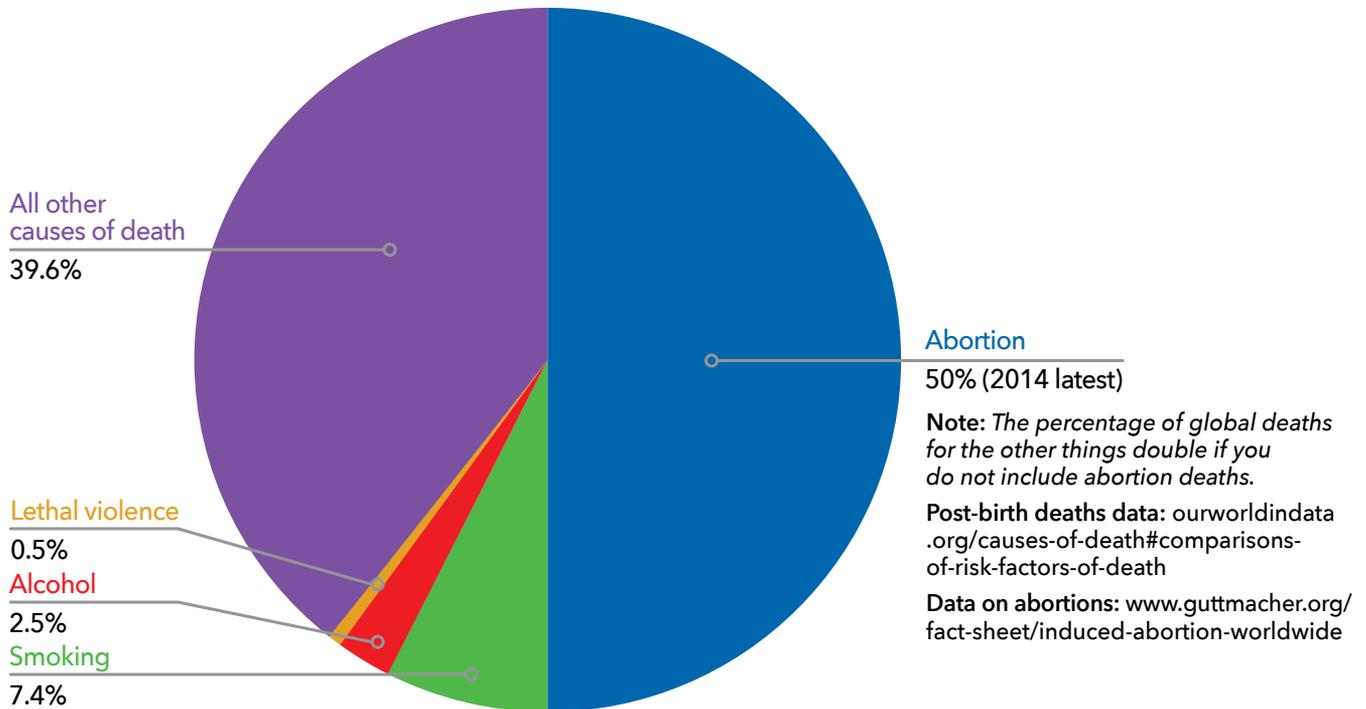
I chose to take a detailed look at these four causes of death (lethal violence, alcohol, smoking and induced abortion) because not only do they directly cause over 60% of all global deaths between them but three of them have a pretty straightforward solution. If people would stop drinking, smoking and killing their babies, that alone would impact nearly two thirds of all the deaths on earth.

⁴ ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death

Smoking Tobacco 8,300,000

Communicable & malnutrition diseases 10,400,000

Global Deaths in 2017



Lethal Violence: 560,000 Deaths Annually

Lethal violence gets more global news time and a greater share of the public consciousness than alcohol, smoking and abortion combined. That isn't really surprising because of the kinds of deaths lethal violence includes: homicide (385,000), war (99,000), accidental homicide and legal interventions by law enforcement (76,000). Images of the victims of violence and the suffering that surround them are easy to sympathize with and to sensationalize. Tragic events often garner intense *negative* media coverage and global condemnation is the norm.

« Lethal violence, alcohol, smoking and induced abortion...directly cause over 60% of all global deaths.



Reports of violent events can paint a hopeless picture of the global state of humanity. Mass shootings, bombings and other terrorist events occur seemingly every month. As of this writing, there are at least 37 ongoing wars.⁵

However, the truth is that we are probably living in the most peaceful time in recorded history.⁶ There has been a significant decline in global deaths due to violence since the end of World War II. Although lethal violence includes almost all the ways people choose intentionally to kill each other (abortion notably not included), the global number of deaths is surprisingly low, only 560,000 every year.⁷ For context, mosquitoes kill on average 780,000 people each year. When compared to major causes of death the difference is stark: alcohol causes five to six times as many deaths annually while smoking causes almost fifteen times as many deaths as violence.⁸ Abortion kills one hundred babies for every one person

⁵ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ongoing_armed_conflicts

⁶ ourworldindata.org/war-and-peace

⁷ www.smallarmssurvey.org/fileadmin/docs/U-Reports/SAS-Report-GVD2017.pdf

⁸ ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death

who dies due to all other forms of violence at the hands of another person.⁹

Most importantly, all of these four things are socially acceptable on the global scale except for lethal violence. The global community responds to violence, even civil wars, with trade sanctions or military intervention. Widespread condemnation is expected. Arguably, it's this condemnation and the freedom people have to express this through democratic action that has contributed to the global decline of violence.¹⁰ Ultimately, the majority of people who die due to violence don't die because violence is *acceptable*, but because someone wanted to kill them.

« All of these four things are socially acceptable on the global scale except for lethal violence. »

Alcohol: 2.8 Million Deaths Annually

In the western Christian context, alcohol is a difficult subject to talk about. For many Christians the consumption of alcohol goes beyond merely being a morally neutral activity to the point that for them drinking represents taking a moral stand against legalism. For many other Christians alcohol represents the pain caused by a loved one who drinks too much or the loss of a child to a drunk driver.

However, few are aware of the number of deaths actually resulting from alcohol consumption. There is a widespread misconception that alcohol is only harmful in the extreme case of alcoholism. But the fact is that most people who die from the consumption of alcohol aren't even considered alcoholics. For example, in Russia as many as a third of all deaths are attributable to drinking, but only 4.73% of the population is considered to even have an alcohol use disorder.¹¹ Likewise, in the US, one source says only 6.2% of the adult population have an alcohol use disorder, but notes that 26.9% of all people

⁹ www.guttmacher.org/fact-sheet/induced-abortion-worldwide

¹⁰ slides.ourworldindata.org/war-and-violence/#/title-slide

¹¹ ourworldindata.org/alcohol-consumption#alcohol-use-disorders

age 18+ and 13.4% of people aged 12–20 (who aren't even legally allowed to drink) have engaged in binge drinking within the last month.¹² Alcoholism is rarely reported in Muslim countries, but alcohol consumption doubled in the Middle East between 2001 and 2011¹³ and doubled in India between 2005 and 2016 (Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health, WHO, 2018).

Increasingly, alcohol consumption is seen as a part of “coping” with daily life, especially for women. As a result, alcohol related fatalities for women in the US increased by 85% in the decade between 2007 and 2017 alone.¹⁴ One mother put it this way, “It's so socially acceptable. Even if you drink a lot, it's not seen as weird—it's normal to drink as a parent, we celebrate it. There is a culture that says, ‘Moms, this is your right. You have earned this. You actually need it.’”¹⁵ This is not an exclusively American phenomenon. Many other countries also have increasing societal expectations for drinking daily and for women drinking heavily.¹⁶

« Most people who die from the consumption of alcohol aren't considered alcoholics. »

The normalization of alcohol consumption as a part of daily life largely resulted from a concerted effort on the part of the global alcohol industry since at least the prohibition era of the early 1900s, an industry with an annual revenue of over 1.5 trillion dollars globally.¹⁷ The effectiveness of this approach to advertising is why the majority of people who die due to alcohol use drink what is considered “normal” amounts of alcohol. Because of this societal blindness to the effects of “normal” alcohol consumption, *alcohol is the leading*

¹² www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-facts-and-statistics

¹³ www.economist.com/node/21560543/all-comments?page=1

¹⁴ [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle200](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31310-2/fulltext#seccestitle200)

¹⁵ www.webmd.com/women/news/20180718/alcohol-consumption-among-women-is-on-the-rise

¹⁶ read.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/tackling-harmful-alcohol-use_9789264181069-en#page1

¹⁷ www.statista.com/statistics/696641/market-value-alcoholic-beverages-worldwide/

*cause of death globally for people age 15–49.*¹⁸ Furthermore, despite the widespread belief that moderate alcohol consumption is good for your health, the only amount of alcohol consumption that doesn't carry a significant risk to your overall health is none.¹⁹

These facts do not even begin to touch on the other fatal and non-fatal results of alcohol consumption that are socially or morally destructive. While an estimated 35% of women globally have experienced some sort of sexual violence,²⁰ *half of all sexual assaults are attributed to alcohol consumption.*²¹ Additionally, alcohol use causes more than half of 1.35 million traffic fatalities every year²² and is involved in the majority of homicides, cases of domestic violence and child abuse.²³

We need to rethink what we consider an acceptable amount of alcohol consumption. In the face of the global weight of harm done by alcohol we must carefully and prayerfully consider how we relate to the alcohol industry and use of alcohol on the field and in the lives of those to whom we witness and work alongside.

Smoking Tobacco: 8.3 Million Deaths Annually

While nicotine is not the most intoxicating drug, tobacco is the deadliest, killing over 8.3 million people per year.²⁴ Despite downward trends of usage, tobacco is still the leading preventable cause of death in the USA (not counting abortion). Tobacco causes 20% of US deaths, including multiple forms of cancer, heart, and lung problems even through second-hand smoke.²⁵ More than twice as many people die every year globally from secondhand smoke as are killed by violence (1.22 million people in 2017).²⁶

18 ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death#comparisons-of-risk-factors-of-death

19 [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)31571-X/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)31571-X/fulltext)

20 evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en

21 pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/arh25-1/43-51.htm

22 apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/276462/9789241565684-eng.pdf

23 addictionresource.com/alcohol/effects/alcohol-related-crimes/

24 ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death

25 www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/health_effects/tobacco_related_mortality/index.htm

26 ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death

So why do people keep on smoking? Well the simple fact is that it's very, very addictive. According to a 2010 report prepared for the European Union (EU), tobacco has a substantially higher risk of causing addiction than heroin, cocaine, alcohol, or cannabis.²⁷ One researcher testified in a trial that "there's a greater likelihood that a person who starts smoking will become dependent than a person who starts using heroin..."²⁸ Globally, over 100,000 children start smoking every day,²⁹ and even though it is estimated that half of the smokers in the USA try to quit smoking every year, less than 6% manage to quit smoking completely.³⁰ This massive influx of new smokers and tobacco's addictive qualities have resulted in the smoking of over 3 million cigarettes every minute in China alone.

« Globally, over 100,000 children start smoking every day. »

Globally 15 billion cigarettes are sold every day and over 5 trillion every year.³¹ Tobacco use has turned into a global pandemic with one billion addicts, half of whom will die from smoking, and 80% living in lower-income countries.³²

Despite the growing global trends, in the United States social condemnation of smoking and the resulting legal changes have been effective in curbing and even reversing the rates of smoking. Following public condemnation of the health risks of smoking, cigarette ads were banned on TV and radio starting in 1971 and smoking in restaurants began to be banned in 1995. The rate of smoking for American adults has dropped from 42% in 1964 to 14% in 2017.³³ This trend is hopeful because it shows that public outcry can move society and government support

27 SCENIHR, Addictiveness and Attractiveness of Tobacco Additives, 2010.

28 *Evans v. Lorillard*, 990 N.E. 2d 997 (Mass. 2013)

29 healthresearchfunding.org/7-unbelievable-nicotine-addiction-statistics/

30 www.drugabuse.gov/publications/research-reports/tobacco-nicotine-e-cigarettes/nicotine-addictive

31 healthresearchfunding.org/7-unbelievable-nicotine-addiction-statistics/

32 www.verywellmind.com/global-smoking-statistics-for-2002-2824393

33 www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/consequences-smoking-consumer-guide.pdf; www.cdc.gov/tobacco/data_statistics/fact_sheets/fast_facts/index.htm

against even industries as powerful as tobacco with products that rank among some of the most addictive in the world.

« Public outcry can move society...against industries, even as powerful as tobacco. »

Abortion: 56 Million Deaths Annually

“Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” —Bob Pierce

If you think the unborn are humans, then abortion in the modern world is nothing short of the greatest atrocity in the entire history of humankind. There have been more than 1,539,585,000 abortions globally since 1980.³⁴ That’s one and a half billion in the last 39 years. That puts the number of people intentionally killed before birth somewhere upward of 1.5 times the total number of all the people killed in all known and estimated wars in all of human history.³⁵

No other cause of death even comes close to the number of deaths caused by abortion. Not the Black Plague, which killed 20% of the world’s population, nor the Spanish flu which killed more than 50,000,000 people in only 2 years, nor even smallpox which killed over 300,000,000 people. And abortion isn’t a plague or a natural disaster. It is human choice combined with stripping the status of human from the unborn. If they aren’t people, their deaths don’t matter. Thus, the greatest cause of death in human history is socially acceptable.

Humanity has a long and sordid history of deciding certain groups of people aren’t people at all. From the Nazi’s dehumanization of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals to the slave-markets of ancient Sumer to every slave owning society in history, the reduction of some group of people or another to less than human status had always been used to justify stripping people of their basic human

rights and thus enslaving and murdering them. The same narrative continues today, compounded by the fact that in the modern world access to abortion has become a symbol of women’s rights.

In the twisted postmodern worldview of the West the ability to have sex without any (perceived) consequences has come to be seen as a basic component of human rights. And as such, it’s often the Western-educated social elites—doctors, teachers, etc.—who are telling people that the best option is abortion; ironically in the *only century* when safe and inexpensive contraceptives are widely available and very effective at preventing unwanted pregnancies. It is in part this crazed notion that saving people from the consequences of their actions (or other people’s, in the case of rape) is one of, if not the ultimate good which drives much of the fervor on the pro-abortion side of the issue. I suspect that most of the killing that has been done over the bloody course of human history was done in the name of saving someone.

Death may be the last enemy to be defeated, but we can’t let it run roughshod over more than 50,000,000 babies every year while we work toward that day. So don’t be timid about speaking up and letting people know that God loves them and their unborn babies. Show them that love. Simple offers of help and encouragement can save lives and love lived out can change the world.

“The Role of the Missionary

The role of a missionary is a difficult one. Even as imperfect stand-ins for the Savior of all humanity there are many causes, projects and people demanding (and deserving of) our time. So when we start talking about working against the sources of 60% of all deaths, that can sound like a task too big to even start. But the chances are good that every one of us is already in a relationship with someone whose life is being affected by one of these death industries. How we respond to those people will be different in every context, every relationship and every situation. Only God knows what the right response will be. Fortunately, we can ask Him. 

³⁴ www.numberofabortions.com/

³⁵ Hedges, Chris, *What Every Person Should Know About War*, Copyright © 2003 by Chris Hedges