

Dumper deaths – public health breakdown on Karachi’s roads

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Dear Madam, In the past half a year, several newspaper reports have been published on deaths and injuries in children and adults resulting from the collision of a dumper with other vehicles on the roads of Karachi¹⁻⁵. Devastating families and upending lives and livelihoods, and adding to the burgeoning avoidable burden of injuries, with resultant strain on trauma care services in the city.

A dumper, also called a dumper truck, is a heavy, usually 4-wheeled vehicle used on construction sites, mining operations, infrastructure project sites, or for ferrying municipal garbage or debris collection. Often in the aftermath of these tragic road traffic accidents, outraged mobs retaliate by beating up culprit dumper drivers and torching their vehicles¹⁻³. The frequency and magnitude of these avoidable road traffic accidents can no longer be deemed and dismissed as isolated incidents, but reflect a deeper system failure and deteriorating trust in them.

Karachi is the largest city of Pakistan with a population of over twenty million, based on the last census conducted in 2023⁶. Road traffic accidents have been widely studied in the city⁷⁻⁸. However, no studies to date have addressed the growing public health menace of dumper truck-related road traffic accidents in the city.

These road traffic accidents involving dumper trucks are now a public health emergency in the maritime metropolis of Karachi. Resulting in loss of life, acute, chronic, and permanent disabilities; psychological trauma to families and communities; mob violence, and traffic paralysis. No studies have been reported on the sociological and psychological toll on witnesses, children, as well as emergency responders in the city. We suggest that various prestigious academic institutes based in the city consider studying the mental, physical, and economic toll it is taking on the affected individuals and their

families. This will help quantify the true burden of these road traffic accidents as a prerequisite for effective response interventions in the city.

The root causes of these road traffic accidents in the city may lie in suboptimal regulatory oversight and weak enforcement. Inadequately trained drivers operating these massive vehicles in densely populated areas with perhaps partially functional brakes might contribute to these accidents. Further compounded by ineffective speed monitoring by the relevant law enforcement authorities. The festering frustration of the public resulting in mob retaliation is not justice but a reflection of public desperation and eroded institutional trust. Mob justice has been reported to be a frequent event in Pakistan⁹.

Clearly, a multi-sectoral public health response is warranted in the city to effectively address this ongoing calamity. We suggest stronger enforcement and expansion of urban vehicle regulations in terms of an immediate crackdown on illegal and/or unsafe dumpers and more strict enforcement of existing bans on dumpers operating during high-risk hours in the city. Mapping and monitoring of high-risk intersections and road arteries in the city by leveraging Geographic Information Systems in the city to analyse these accidents and identification of hotspots. To mandate and enforce regular screening for sleep deprivation, substance use, and mental fitness of dump truck drivers.

The public health emergency of growing dumper-related morbidity and mortality burden in the city is ostensibly the predictable outcome of urban neglect and system-wide inertia. The disturbing tide of mob retaliation needs to be addressed as a distress call rather than mere lawlessness in Karachi. We recommend that dumper-related traffic accidents and their resultant health burden in the city be declared as an emergency; identification and implementation, with strict enforcement, of multi-sectoral remedial measures in the city to stem and eventually reverse this tide of avoidable accidents on the Karachi roads. We take solace in a recent newspaper report that law enforcement authorities have taken a more proactive role to address the rising tide of road traffic injuries in Karachi, using a data-driven approach¹⁰. While the final report of this imperative endeavour is

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awaited, ostensibly to serve as the lodestar for targetted response and optimal resource allocation, lives are being lost regularly in Karachi.

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