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Indirect 9/11 death toll keeps climbing

**Attacks convinced more Americans to hit the roads, where more have died
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Nineteen terrorists killed more than 2,700 Americans when they commandeered four planes and flew them into buildings and the ground. However, those terrorists, even though dead these four years, may very well have indirectly killed and maimed as many or more Americans since 9/11.

How can that be? On 9/11, the terrorists immediately increased the overall cost of flying by increasing many potential air passengers' perceived risk of flying. Since 9/11, most air travelers have feared that terrorists would strike again using commercial aircraft.

The terrorists, of course, motivated the U.S. government to dramatically beef up security checks at airports, the result of which has been an increase in travel time for all passengers. The time spent in security lines at airports has translated into a greater overall cost of air travel, relative to ground travel.

Hence, since 9/11, more Americans than otherwise have been more inclined to make their trips by car, leading to more miles driven and greater highway congestion. Since vehicle travel is far more deadly per mile than air travel, it should surprise no one that auto accidents, injuries, and deaths have increased as a consequence of the greater cost of air travel imposed by the 9/11 terrorists (independent of other changes - for example, road conditions - that can be expected to affect car-travel deaths).

Garrick Blalock, Vrinda Kadiyali, and Daniel Simon, Cornell University economists, have reported in two working papers the econometric findings of the potential tie between the terrorists' actions and car-travel deaths. They found that the 9/11 events and resulting security measures reduced air-travel volume, independent of other forces, by about 5 percent nationwide (and 8 percent from the nation's major airports).

The resulting increase in car travel led to approximately 242 more traffic deaths per month than would otherwise have been predicted for the last three months of 2001.

As Americans adjusted their post-9/11 travel behavior to accommodate the greater cost of air travel, the increase in the number of car deaths per month attributable to the attacks began to taper off. Still, the Cornell researchers were able to surmise that at least 1,200 more Americans lost their lives on the nation's roadways in the twelve months following 9/11 than would have otherwise been predicted.

It is no stretch to think that the greater count of American road deaths over the past four years attributable to greater flying risks and 9/11 security measures have surpassed the 9/11 deaths.

The economic tie between air and car travel means that the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) should be ever mindful that raising the security-alert level from, say, yellow to orange can spell greater road deaths. It also means that any waste of scarce TSA manpower on screening aging grandmothers and infants, because of a prohibition on profiling, can be equally deadly. This is because the tighter security measures and waste of security resources can increase the time cost of air travel. The result can be more car travel - and more road accidents, injuries, and deaths.