
ORIGINAL PAPER

Safety and safety promotion: definitions for operational developments

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Abstract

Objective This paper proposes definitions of safety and safety promotion. They apply both to unintentional and intentional injuries or violence.

Method These definitions are the result of a consensus reached over a two-year period through a variety of activities involving nearly 50 experts from different sectors (public security, transportation, justice, health and social services, sports and recreation, municipalities, etc.).

Results Safety has been defined as a state in which hazards and conditions leading to physical, psychological or material harm are controlled in order to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community. Four basic conditions are regarded as essential to achieve safety in a community. Safety promotion was defined as a process that leads to the development and maintenance of those basic conditions. This process involves various actors and may be applied at various levels of intervention. It may put into contribution both environmental and behavioural modifications.

Discussion Common operational definitions of safety and safety promotion can facilitate collaboration among those concerned with safety enhancement (e.g., public safety, health and social services, transport, justice, municipalities, etc.) by describing more precisely the goals they are all trying to achieve and by making possible a better understanding of the potential contribution of each sector and of the common areas where they can collaborate most effectively.

Keywords: Injury prevention; safety promotion; violence; injuries; terminology.

Introduction

This paper proposes definitions of safety^a and safety promotion. They apply to unintentional injuries as well as intentional injuries or violence. These definitions are the result of a consensus¹ reached after a number of activities that were held between June 1996 and May 1998. A first paper on the conceptual and operational aspects of safety and safety promotion was drafted and published.² This paper was presented and discussed during three international events^b and in an Internet discussion group. Overall, more than 50 experts

^a In many languages, the words 'safety' and 'security' are translated by the same word. In this article, the authors have made the choice to use only the word 'safety.' It should be understood that here the concept of 'security' is included in the word 'safety.'

^b 1-Deuxième séminaire international du réseau francophone de prévention des traumatismes et des accidents: La volonté d'agir. Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu, Québec, Canada. June 16 to 18, 1997.

2-International Seminar on Safety and Safety Promotion. Québec. Château Frontenac. 5-6 February, 1998.

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from different sectors (public security, transportation, justice, health and social services, sports and recreation, municipalities, etc.) participated in the process. The proposed definitions are therefore based on the knowledge and the experience of these experts. They should not be regarded as final definitions, but as provisional, part of an ongoing process aimed at clarifying these concepts.

There are at least three reasons for such a process. First, there is a great deal of confusion with regard to what is included in the concept of safety. For some, it refers to the prevention of crime and violence, for others, to a feeling of being out of danger rather than any objective state, or to the satisfaction of basic needs (food, shelter, clothing, etc.). These interpretations do not all necessarily include injury prevention, as is often the case in the public health sector. Therefore, clarification of the concept of safety will allow a better understanding of some of its facets, and thereby, facilitate safety promotion initiatives.^{3,4} Second, a common definition shared by the large variety of sectors involved (e.g., health, public security, municipalities, justice, housing, recreation, labour) can promote better co-operation between them and also enhance the implementation of a broader scope of interventions. Finally, these definitions will help to relate safety issues to human rights, social justice and poverty, which all require strong and broad alliances, consensus and common understanding.

Definition of safety

Safety has been defined as ‘a state in which hazards and conditions leading to physical, psychological or material harm are controlled in order to preserve the health and well-being of individuals and the community.’ This state is not only related to the absence of intentional or unintentional injuries. It must also lead to a perception of being sheltered from danger. It therefore includes two dimensions. One is objective and is assessed by measuring the number of injuries or behavioural and environmental factual parameters (e.g., traffic-related deaths recorded in a community, proportion of drivers reported to be under the influence of alcohol, number of collisions at a dangerous road intersection). The other is subjective and evaluated according to the feeling of being out of danger (e.g., parents feeling unsafe to let their kids walk to school). Both dimensions sometimes can influence each other positively or negatively. For example, increasing the number of policemen in a given neighbourhood to maintain order might generate a feeling of fear among citizens.⁵ On the other hand, acquiring a firearm to feel better protected from attacks increases the risk of intentional or unintentional injury at home.⁶

Four basic conditions for safety

Safety results from a complex process in which humans interact with their physical, social, cultural, technological,

political, economic and organisational environments. Attaining an optimum level of safety requires that individuals, communities, governments and others create and maintain the following conditions, whatever the setting:

- 1) ***A climate of social cohesion, peace and equity between groups that protects human rights and freedoms.*** This condition refers to a society that is fair and where there is harmony and non-violent coexistence between groups and communities of different races, genders, ages, religions, countries, etc., without impinging on the rights and freedoms of individuals. This condition implies that the population is protected from war or any other form of organised violence. It must move towards a reduction of poverty and inequities, both of which cause a great deal of safety problems.
- 2) ***The respect of the values of individual as well as their physical, material and psychological integrity.*** This condition refers to the harmonious and non-violent co-existence of individuals within a living environment. This state allows each individual to live without the fear of being personally attacked, either psychologically (e.g., harassment, hateful remarks) or physically (e.g., assault, rape), and to be able to enjoy his or her belongings without fear of having them stolen or vandalized. Unlike the first condition (a climate of social cohesion and equity), which refers to interactions between groups, this condition refers to interactions between individuals.
- 3) ***The prevention and control of injuries and other consequences or harm caused by accidents.*** This means the presence of environments and behaviours that prevent the occurrence of bodily lesions resulting from a sudden transfer of energy (mechanical, thermal, electrical, chemical or radiant) or from the sudden deprivation of any vital element (e.g., sudden deprivation of oxygen in the case of drowning).
- 4) ***The provision of effective measures to ensure the presence of the three previous conditions.*** This condition refers to a state of preparedness to cope with undesirable traumatic events. It refers to resources (material, human and financial), to programs and to services made available in a community to minimize the harm caused by an unfortunate event (physical harm or other harm such as social adaptation problems or post-traumatic shock) and to facilitate the rehabilitation of individuals or communities affected.

These four conditions are important and relevant for settings of different scales (e.g., family, school, workplace, neighbourhood, city and nation). Although not exhaustive, they are useful to delineate the domain of safety. By highlighting some of the basic components of safety, examining these conditions leads to a better understanding of the potential contribution of each sector to enhance safety, and therefore draws attention to the common areas where they can collaborate most effectively. For example, the drinking and driving

problem will benefit from interventions from a variety of sectors such as public security, health, justice and municipalities. On the other hand, by applying the law, the justice sector will contribute to reducing drinking and driving, violence against women and many forms of segregation, thus contributing to at least three essential conditions for safety.

Definition of safety promotion

Safety promotion is the *process* applied to develop and maintain the basic conditions for safety at a local, national and international level by individuals, communities, governments and others, including businesses and non-governmental organisations. This process includes all efforts agreed upon to modify environments (physical, social, technological, political, economic and organisational), as well as safety-related behaviours (Fig. 1). Both types of interventions must be considered in a safety promotion programme, either because of their direct influence on safety or because of the interaction between them. Acting on structures and environments can favour safe behaviours (e.g., narrowing of roads to reduce speed) and, reciprocally, acting on behaviours can favour safe environments (e.g., storing firearms or toxic substances properly to enhance home safety). Moreover, acting on behaviours will influence social norms^c that will allow more sustainable environmental changes (e.g., promoting voluntary seat belt use to make a seat belt law more acceptable).

The safety promotion process needs to be adapted to the specific characteristics of communities and countries. It includes all community enabling activities and must be based on the active involvement of the population in identifying objectives as well as solutions to enhance their safety.

Discussion

This paper delineates the domain of safety promotion by proposing an operational definition of safety based on the presence of four conditions that can be acted upon. It recognizes an objective and a subjective dimension of safety that can lead to practical considerations. Indeed, one can observe a situation in which an individual or a population feels safe despite the presence of an imminent danger. On the other hand, an individual or a population may feel unsafe without any objective reason. These two situations are both problematic and will require different interventions. For example, when the feeling of insecurity is not supported by objective parameters, the intervention must focus mainly on perceptions. On the contrary, if the feeling of insecurity is supported by real dangers, the focus must be on those dangers. Thus,

^cConditions perceived as desirable by a majority of a given population.

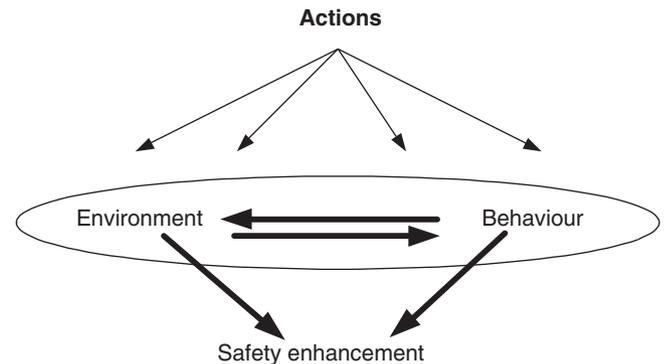


Figure 1. The safety promotion process.

safety promotion programs need to be adapted to each community and should take into account both its real-life experience as well as its subjective judgment about situations that affect it.^{7,8}

In the past, the injury prevention and control approach has contributed to the understanding that injuries are an important health problem with specific risk factors and target groups. It emphasizes that, like other health problems, injuries are due to preventable causes rather than random events beyond our control. This understanding of the phenomenon has elicited the development of numerous initiatives to better document the epidemiology of the problem and to develop preventive measures. Resources were initially mobilised for non-intentional injuries and then, more recently, for intentional injuries (interpersonal and self-inflicted violence). The description of this phenomenon as a health problem has placed injuries on the public health agenda.

Anyone who works in injury prevention is aware of the indispensable contributions of sectors other than health (e.g., public safety, transport, justice, municipalities, housing, etc.) when the time comes to design interventions. In accordance with their mandates, these other sectors will often explicitly identify safety as a goal without a common understanding of the underlying concept. That is why we believe an approach defining the concepts of safety and safety promotion that includes injury prevention can be a good contact point between the health sector and the other sectors involved in the safety of the population. By proposing a common basis of understanding, such an approach should help to improve co-operation among the different disciplines and sectors involved in safety enhancement activities.

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