

# Why incident and not accident or incident in the field of public health and road safety in Colombia?

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the semantic differences and how we refer to events resulting from road safety in the field of public health and road safety in Colombia. We constantly use the terms accident, accident and incident as synonyms to refer to events resulting from road safety, ignoring their true meaning. The indiscriminate use of these terms leads to a misinterpretation of the phenomenon under analysis. This error persists despite international advances that since the 1990s have recognized the preventable and avoidable nature of these events, the adherence of specialized public health media indicating that the term accident is erroneous, and the subsequent alert by international organizations on the erroneous use of the word accident, ratified at ministerial summits, laid the foundations for the analysis and interpretation of the phenomenon. Unfortunately, in the case of Colombia, the Congress of the Republic of Colombia coined the term accident in Law 769/2002, from which the law is interpreted, and offenders are sanctioned, which not only reflects a lack of alignment with international advances in public health and road safety but also perpetuates the misinterpretation that could affect the effectiveness of public policies. In conclusion, the understanding of terminology related to road events has been significant, highlighting the preventable nature of these events. However, indiscriminate use of terms persists in Colombia, ignoring conceptual evolution and perpetuating the use of misleading terms, especially 'accident', conceived from current legislation.

**Keywords:** public health, accident prevention, incidence, traffic accidents

## Resumen

El objetivo de esta comunicación es reflexionar en torno a las diferencias semánticas y como nos referimos a los eventos resultantes de la inseguridad vial en el ámbito de la Salud Pública y la seguridad vial en Colombia. Constantemente utilizamos los términos accidente, siniestro e incidente como sinónimos para referirnos a los eventos resultantes de la inseguridad vial, ignorando su verdadero significado. Al hacer uso de manera indiscriminada de estos términos incurrimos en error de interpretación del fenómeno analizado. Error que persiste a pesar de avances internacionales que desde la década de los noventa reconocieron la naturaleza prevenible y evitable de estos eventos, la adherencia de medios especializados en salud pública indicando que el término accidente es erróneo, y la posterior alerta de organismos internacionales sobre el uso equivocado de la palabra accidente con ratificación en cumbres ministeriales, sentaron bases sobre el análisis e interpretación del fenómeno. Infelizmente, para el caso de Colombia, el Congreso de la República de Colombia acuñó el término accidente en la Ley 769/2002, desde la cual se interpreta la norma y se sancionan infractores, lo que no solo refleja una falta de alineación con avances internacionales en salud pública y seguridad vial, sino que también perpetúa la interpretación errónea que podría afectar la eficacia de las políticas públicas. En conclusión, la comprensión de la terminología relacionada con eventos viales ha sido significativa, destacando la naturaleza prevenible de estos hechos. Sin embargo, en Colombia persiste uso indiscriminado de términos, ignorando la evolución conceptual y perpetuando el uso de términos equívocos, especialmente “accidente”, concebido desde la actual legislación.

**Palabras clave:** salud pública, prevención de accidentes, incidencia, accidentes de tránsito

### **Accident, casualty and incident**

We usually use the terms accident, casualty and incident to refer to events resulting from road safety, as if they were synonyms, although in fact they are not. By using them indiscriminately, we make a mistake in the interpretation of the phenomenon under analysis. If we refer to it with the term accident, which comes from the Latin *accidens*, participle of *accidere*: “to happen/occur”, we are referring to an eventual occurrence, which arises unexpectedly, an action that alters the regular order of things and from which involuntarily results damage to people or things (1,2).

The philosophical meaning of the term accident is 24 centuries old, comes from Aristotle, and gives meaning to negative meanings, developed and popularized from “chance”, “misfortune”, “bad luck”, “chance” or “destiny” (3). Religion, after Aristotle’s meaning, makes mention of the term accident and interprets it as a “thing of God” or “divine punishment”, only for self-deserved or sins committed by ancestors to his generation (3). But it was only until the fourteenth century, where the English began to use the term accident with the current meaning: “event that occurs by chance, misfortune or fact that happens unexpectedly”, leaving everything to chance or chance, completely ignoring the condition of preventable (3). Furthermore, in his research Ruiz reports that in 1592 the term was coined in the death statistics of London England (The bills of mortality), which included the category “death by several accidents” (3).

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, with the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, the steam engine and other forms of production that changed the world and its way of life, data began to be collected on the frequency of injuries and trauma in the workplace, focusing more on the safety of workers (3). Legislation that protects the worker and regulates compensation in the event of an “accident” has been achieved. Although there are significant advances in labor legislation and regulation, the same does not occur in road safety, since the connotation of “accident” is mediated by a labor type contract and covered by the legislation of the nations, which protects the worker in case of a “labor type accident”, as still mentioned in much of the legislation (3).

At the end of the nineties in the United States of America, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) proclaimed that “collisions are not accidents”, adding a connotation that they are preventable, and setting a precedent in the approach, measurement, analysis, interpretation and communication of the phenomenon from the sciences that study its behavior (4). In the field of Public Health and health sciences, the British Medical Journal prohibited the use of the term accident in its articles, arguing that facts or circumstances that cause death and injury are predictable and preventable, therefore, the term accident should not be used to refer to a preventable event (5).

In 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) expressed its disagreement with the erroneous use of the word accident to refer to road incidents, stating that the term accident gives rise to imprecision when understanding

road incident as an event that is impossible to control. Quite the contrary to its nature, which is preventable and avoidable (4). At the 3rd Ministerial Summit on Road Safety in Stockholm in 2020 (6), which closed the Decade of Action on Road Safety (DASV), the reason for not using the terms accident or accident when referring to events that cause injuries in mobility was discussed, ratifying what was mentioned in 2004, and these events were referred to as road incidents, by nature preventable and avoidable, a denomination currently little used in Colombia (7).

Based on the magnitude, frequency, regulations, insurance mediation and eagerness to compensate the damages derived from a road incident, other terms emerge, specifically from other industries, such as aeronautics, or from countries with high levels of insurance, where there is a culture or obligation to acquire a policy to repair the damages caused, but extrapolated to road safety, referring to these as a claim. Term adopted by countries or contexts where 48% of the vehicles circulating on the road do not have a Compulsory Traffic "Accident" Insurance (SOAT), and the term may not be applicable in Colombia (7).

Siniestro comes from the Latin sinister, event that produces damage or material loss (8), and in an insurance contract, it means concretion of the risk covered in such contract and that determines the origin of the provision of the service by the insurer to compensate the damages caused (9), making reference to a damage of any importance, which may be indemnified by an insurance company. In other words, an event that is mediated by insurance and which has been stipulated in the contract, since it is foreseen that it may occur, causing damage to persons or property (9).

In the semantic evolution of what to call this event, health sciences and public health take the tools of classical epidemiology and refer to it from incidence, a term that comes from the Latin incidentia and refers to an event "manifestation" or "appearance" (10). It was documented as a rhetorical term in the 4th century and used in France during the 13th century as incident (11,12). Incidence expresses the probability that an individual belonging to a population at risk will develop an event in relation to time (13, 14, 15, 16, 17).

Therefore, we could define a road incident as an event that occurs due to human, mechanical, environmental, cultural, technical and behavioral factors, which can be intervened to prevent it from materializing and from an epidemiological concept, that is: a causal and not casual matter, of a pre-

ventable and avoidable nature (18,19). Its incidence could be avoided by public health interventions such as health promotion, disease prevention, risk communication, specific protective measures and the implementation of public, sectoral and extra-sectoral policies (19).

As has been shown, the use of the term accident or accident poses linguistic and conceptual problems in the field of public health, and of course for the approach to this problem that was declared by the WHO as a pandemic of road incidents. Unfortunately, the limited thematic and linguistic depth of the Congress of the Republic of Colombia coined the term accident in Law 769, through which the National Traffic Code was approved in 2002 (20), still in force and from which the norm is interpreted and road incidents are sanctioned, still leaving the interpretation to chance or divine grace as it was thought in the last century. Public Health problems and solutions, as in the case of road incidents, do not derive from chance, luck, destiny or divine mandate; they derive from structured knowledge, from the use of knowledge and its social management. Incidents are controllable as risk, preventable in exposure, avoidable in occurrence and mitigable in individual and collective effects (17). Therefore, they are not accidents or claims, they are incidents, all preventable and avoidable, as proclaimed by the United Nations decades ago (17,18,19, 20, 21).

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