

Estimados suscriptores:

Ralph Keeney, en su artículo "**Personal Decisions Are the Leading Cause of Death**" publicado en el número Nov-Dic 2008 de *Operations Research*, muestra que las decisiones personales (de los estadounidenses) causan más de un millón de muertes prematuras en los Estados Unidos. Desde luego, las decisiones personales de las personas de otros países causan las correspondientes muertes prematuras en esos lugares.

Las decisiones a las que Keeney se refiere incluyen las de fumar, tomar en exceso, manejar a velocidades excesivas, no usar el cinturón de seguridad, relaciones sexuales sin protección, no hacer ejercicio, comer en exceso y suicidarse.

Un factor clave en esas decisiones mortales es que se toman "sin pensar" o dicho más apropiadamente, sin analizar correctamente las decisiones. Muchas vidas, sufrimiento y costo se podrían evitar si se tomaran mejor las decisiones personales.

Hace tres días, *Newsweek* publicó un artículo por Tony Dokoupil titulado "**America's Top Killer: Us**" que hace referencia al artículo de Keeney y una entrevista con él sobre el tema. El artículo de *Newsweek* comienza diciendo que a principio de año nos hacemos promesas de vivir mejor, pero que muy pocos las cumplimos, y que no estamos plenamente concientes de las implicaciones.

Keeney propone que se añada el tema "toma de decisiones" en la enseñanza en las escuelas públicas para que los jóvenes estén mejor capacitados para decidir bien.

Les anexo un fragmento del artículo de *Newsweek*, y lo pueden leer completo en <http://www.newsweek.com/id/177587/output/print> (el artículo de *Operations Research* sólo está disponible a suscriptores).

Reciban un cordial saludo y mis mejores deseos de que este año mejore su calidad de vida y la de sus semejantes.

Roberto Ley Borrás

America's Top Killer: Us

Tony Dokoupil

Newsweek Web Exclusive, Jan 2, 2009

A new study argues our personal choices cause more than 1 million premature deaths a year. What, if anything, should the government do to protect us from ourselves?

Fragmento

With the dawn of a new and potentially difficult year upon us, many Americans will swear that this is the year that they'll eat better, exercise more, or quit smoking. Of course, most of us will fail to stick to these healthy resolutions. And, while we know that getting in shape is good for us, a new study shows the true cost of our tendency not to make wise decisions about taking care of ourselves. According to Duke University's Ralph Keeney, whose work was published last month in the journal *Operations Research*, America's top killer isn't cancer or heart disease, or even smoking and overeating—it's our inability to make smart choices that leads us to engage in those and other self-destructive behaviors.

"Each year more than a million people needlessly die because of their own personal decisions," says Keeney, whose work gives new meaning to the cliché we're our "own worst enemies." That means more than half the population will make a decision leading to an early grave, he reports, including a full 55 percent of people who die between the ages of 15 and 64. Most alarming, that figure has

jumped fourfold since 1900, despite the world becoming a safer place overall thanks to seat belts, smoking laws, health food and a host of other tools to help people stay inside the lines.

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To generate his numbers, Keeney took national death statistics from 2000 and tried to trace the official cause of each death (ranging from cancers, diabetes and AIDS to fatal accidents, suicides and homicides) back to some personal call, such as the decision to smoke, drink, drive without a seat belt or have unprotected sex. Because the numbers can't show for sure that a person's smoking, for instance, caused their lung cancer, he used risk data to make reliable guesses—smoking is known to triple the risk of cancer, for example, which lead Keeney to conclude that roughly two thirds of all smokers who got lung cancer brought it upon themselves.

That's not so controversial when identifying three packs a day as the cause of cancer or the choice to speed as the cause of a fatal crash, but Keeney is on thinner ice when counting all suicides as examples of death by personal decision. His reasoning: the decision to kill oneself may not be rational, or even clearheaded, but it's definitely personal. But with evidence accumulating that many mental illnesses have genetic or physiological origins, labeling the suicidal impulses of someone suffering from major depression or bipolar disorder a "choice" may not be exactly fair. The same goes for certain addictions to drinking, smoking and overeating, which all have significant genetic triggers—yet Keeney holds firm. "Prior to having these habits," he writes, "the individuals made decisions that lead to [them] and these are the personal decisions that are of concern in this paper."

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Why do so many of us make lousy personal decisions, even ones that kill us? Keeney, for one, chalks it up to short-term thinking and it-can't-happen-to-me exceptionalism. Other scholars, such as Harvard's Cass Sunstein, University of Chicago's Richard Thaler and MIT's Dan Ariely—all loosely organized, like Keeney, under the suddenly hip banner of behavioral economics—have in recent years come up with different reasons for why we sometimes act a fool. Topping their lists are apathy, peer pressure, and the tendency to misperceive in predictable ways—such as judging a mountain of food a molehill if it's served on a massive plate.

However the experts explain our tendencies to self-destruct, they all agree that we could use some help negotiating these choices better—and that government can provide it. For Keeney, it's by adding "decision making" to the standard curriculum in public schools so that more children grow up empowered to recognize and mine all their options, rather than accept those presented by others. "Imagine if they taught World War II as decision making," he says. "That'd be fabulous."

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