

# A Preventable Epidemic: Child Road Traffic Fatalities in Zambia and the Case for a Safe System Approach

Daniel Mwamba<sup>1\*</sup>

\*lead presenter: [daniel.mwamba@zambiarodsafetytrust.org](mailto:daniel.mwamba@zambiarodsafetytrust.org)

<sup>1</sup> Zambia Road Safety Trust (ZRST), Lusaka, Zambia

**Keywords:** Child Road Safety; Zambia; Safe System; Vision Zero; School Zones; Road Traffic Injury

Organize your abstract following the structure Background–Aim–Method–Results–Conclusions. Do not use references unless absolutely necessary. Limit your abstract to 700 words. Submit the abstract as a .pdf file using the naming format ‘Surname\_Firstname.pdf’ (first author).

## Background

In Zambia, child road traffic fatalities have reached emergency levels with no sustained decline since 2016. In 2025, 243 children under 16 were killed in road crashes the highest toll in a decade equating to five deaths every week. For school-age children aged 5–14, road traffic accidents account for 28.8% of all external cause deaths, making the daily journey to school one of the greatest threats to child survival. Most victims are pedestrians or passengers with no protection under an infrastructure system not designed with their safety in mind. No dedicated national child road safety strategy exists, and child casualties continue at decade-high levels despite the existence of proven, low-cost interventions.

## Aim

This paper examines the scale and systemic causes of child road traffic fatalities in Zambia and evaluates the evidence for a national Safe System approach prioritising safe speeds, safe roads, and safe road environments around schools as the most effective and economically justified policy response.

## Method

A mixed-methods, cross-sectional analysis was conducted using official crash statistics from the Zambia Police Service and RTSA (2023–2025), national SAVVY (Sample Vital Registration with Verbal Autopsy) mortality data providing cause-of-death estimates for children aged 5–14, and infrastructure evaluation data from UNDP/ZRST Safe School Zone pilot projects in Lusaka. A comparative policy analysis benchmarks Zambia’s child road safety outcomes against Sweden and the Netherlands both Safe System (Vision Zero-aligned) countries to identify evidence-based, contextually transferable interventions. The Safe System framework, endorsed by the WHO and the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety 2021–2030, underpins the analytical lens throughout.

## **Results**

In 2025, 1,493 child road casualties were recorded, including 243 deaths (148 boys; 95 girls), primarily among pedestrians and passengers. Official figures likely represent a significant undercount: peer-reviewed evidence indicates sub-Saharan African countries may capture as few as one in four actual road fatalities. Zambia's SAVVY data confirms road traffic accidents are the leading external cause of death for children aged 5–14 (28.8% of injury deaths), second only to malaria overall. International comparisons illustrate the scale of preventable loss: Sweden recorded 15 child road deaths in 2020 and the Netherlands averaged 17 per year (children aged 0–14) across 2015–2024. Within Zambia, the UNDP/ZRST Lusaka pilot at five primary schools upgraded access road safety ratings from one star to five stars (iRAP methodology), serving 8,000+ learners demonstrating that high-impact results are achievable and affordable in the local context.

## **Conclusions**

- Child road traffic fatalities in Zambia have reached emergency levels, with 243 deaths in 2025 the highest in a decade and no sustained downward trend since 2016.
- Road traffic accidents are the leading external cause of death for Zambian children aged 5–14 (28.8% of injury deaths), rivalling malaria as a national child survival priority.
- Evidence from Sweden and the Netherlands demonstrates that Safe System implementation can reduce child road deaths to a fraction of current Zambian levels.
- The UNDP/ZRST Lusaka pilot proves that iRAP five-star school zone safety is achievable and affordable within the Zambian context, providing a replicable national model.
- A national child road safety strategy with a 2030 halving target, mandatory Safe School Zones, and investment in safe walking routes to school is both urgently needed and evidentially justified.