

# Differing dangers at sea

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The probability of being killed at work is 25 times higher for a coastal fisherman than for an offshore worker, according to a study from the UiS. Seafarers also run a high risk of accidents.

Fifteen people died on vessels registered in [Norway](#) during 2010, figures from the Norwegian Maritime Directorate (NMD) show. Eight of these were [fishermen](#).

Although these [statistics](#) show that the number of work accidents went down in 2009-10, the total has remained at a high and stable level for many decades.

The number of accidents in maritime transport has moreover increased since 2000, with a growing number of vessels sinking, going aground or being involved in collisions.

"When fishing smacks sink, the effect is usually felt by small [coastal communities](#) where [high risk](#) has been accepted for generations," says Preben Lindøe.

"Such individual accidents at sea fail to attract media attention or to generate any public debate on [safety](#)."

As professor at the University of Stavanger (UiS), he questions why Norwegians accept such big losses in fishing and shipping, with many accidents on merchant ships also ignored or forgotten.

Prof Lindøe notes, for example, that more than 90 bulk carriers of a certain type have been wrecked or sunk over a period of 15 years, during which time over 600 seafarers have died.

## Responses

He and fellow UiS professors Ole Andreas Engen and Odd Einar Olsen have recently published an article in *Safety Science on Responses to accidents in different industrial sectors*.

Looking at the progress made by safety efforts in offshore, fishing and some shipping activities, their research has identified major differences.

That includes the much greater likelihood of fishermen being killed compared with offshore workers over the past 15 years, Prof Lindøe notes.

He sees a clear connection between the differing levels of attention paid to safety in these three sectors and the notice this issue has attracted from outside.

"A concentration of public awareness on only certain industries reveals some paradoxical aspects of our perception and handling of safety in society."

This view is backed by Prof Engen: "It's easier to adopt regulations under pressure from government and unions, for instance, in industries where risk and dangers are visible and attract great public concern. The oil sector is a case in point."

He notes that the figures for injuries and accidents on Norwegian offshore facilities have declined sharply since the 1980s.

"Several major accidents, such as the Ekofisk Bravo blowout in 1977 and the Alexander L Kielland disaster in 1980, were a wake-up call to oil companies, government, and the general public. The gas leak on Snorre A in 2004 served as a further reminder."

The number of injuries on Norway's offshore facilities declined by almost 80 per cent over the 30 years since 1976, from about 50 per million working hours then to 10 in 2006.

## Attention

Many factors explain why safety in the oil sector has attracted so much attention from the industry, government and the public, the two professors say.

"The oil business is a heavyweight economic player on which Norway is entirely dependent," observes Prof Lindøe.

"Petroleum has 14 times the export value of [fish](#)."

"At the same time, the Norwegian government has declared that this industry will be a world leader for safety. And the newspapers write about oil because people are interested in it."

The lack of such external interest makes safety work much more arduous for fishermen and in maritime transport. Smaller margins also make it more difficult to invest in better equipment, newer vessels or improved training.

Profs Lindøe and Engen also believe that under-reporting of [accidents](#) and near misses is a major problem.

"Organisation in each sector also differs," explains Prof Engen. "Fishing

vessel owners and crews have traditionally been members of the same union, for example, so that conflicts of interest between safety and costs fail to emerge."

"Safety representatives are seldom to be found, and many vessels belong to family-owned companies where safety is a taboo subject," Engen says.

"Fishermen, like farmers, are also preoccupied with their occupational freedom. Imposed safety measures would meet resistance and have little effect. So the desire to improve must come from the fishermen themselves."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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