



May 22, 2003

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Dear Professor Ervin,

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) recently reported that, for the first time in twenty-five years, the number of people dying each year on our highways has increased.

NHTSA's figures indicate that 42,850 people were killed on the highway last year, the highest annual total since 1990, and that a majority of the increase was due to fatalities in sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks that roll over with deadly consequences. Tragically, this backsliding is occurring in an area, motor vehicle safety, viewed until now as one of the great public health success stories.

Your response to this appalling news was to suggest to *The Washington Post* that further efforts will be less effective than those of the past in reducing the death rate from motor vehicle crashes.<sup>1</sup> This rejoinder is an unconscionable but easy out, and I am writing to challenge you to re-think this position.

In fact, a nearly identical position was articulated the same week in an *Automotive News* article by Gloria Berquist, Vice President of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, the major trade association for the automotive industry.<sup>2</sup> While the Alliance has much to gain by deflecting the blame away from the industry's relentless marketing of poorly designed sport utility vehicles (SUVs), you should think long and hard before following its lead.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Schneider, "Deadly Driving Trend Alters Safety Focus; Fatalities Turn Attention to SUVs, Crash-Avoidance Technology," *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2003 ("It's possible, [Ervin] said, that the nation's fatality rate has hit a statistical wall, a level of death that cannot be improved upon without great expense and societal change." ; "You never know if an incremental upgrade [in safety] isn't counterbalanced by a change in risk-taking by the people," said the University of Michigan's Ervin.") This last comment ignores the well-maintained line between a person's voluntary assumption of risk and an imposed risk, a distinction enshrined in law and ethics.

<sup>2</sup> Harry Stoffer, "It's Tougher to Improve Traffic Safety," *Automotive News*, May 5, 2003 (Responding to new traffic fatality statistics which show a rising death rate from SUVs and pickups, Alliance Vice President Gloria Berquist said "the low-hanging fruit was harvested in the early years.").

It is far too easy for university-based safety researchers to remain blithely out-of-touch with political reality, and to rely on funding from industry sources for their research. Nonetheless, it is your obligation to look past the industry's legendary indifference to carnage on the highways, and to ask what can be done to save lives on the highway. As someone with knowledge of real safety issues and the power to motivate students, it is also incumbent upon you to insist that highway safety funding levels reflect the tremendous social and emotional violence that is now increasing for the first time since 1990. There is little room for your studied resignation, given the stagnation and now, reversal, in gains made over the past thirty years.

It derogates your role as a safety researcher, and it is nothing short of immoral to suggest we have "topped out" on efforts to save lives on the highway. Consider the following facts:

- Nearly 6.3 million motor vehicle crashes occurred in the United States in 2001, or one crash every 5 seconds. On average, a person was injured every 10 seconds in these crashes, and killed every 12 minutes.<sup>3</sup>
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and disability for Americans under age 35,<sup>4</sup> and cause 95 percent of transportation-related deaths and 99 percent of transportation-related injuries each year, yet NHTSA receives only a paltry 1 percent of the total Department of Transportation budget.<sup>5</sup>
- Motor vehicle injuries are the greatest public health problem facing children today, and motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among children for every age after their first birthday.<sup>6</sup> During 2001, 1,579 children ages 14 years and younger died as occupants in motor vehicle crashes, and approximately 228,000 were injured – an average of 30 deaths and more than 4,300 injuries each week.<sup>7</sup>
- NHTSA calculated the total economic costs for motor vehicle crashes in 2000 as more than \$230 billion, or the equivalent of a staggering \$800 for every man, woman and child living in the United States.<sup>8</sup> NHTSA's total also excludes any consideration of the incredible pain and suffering of victims, or the devastating emotional toll on families and friends following a crash.
- Current funding for NHTSA's motor vehicle safety and consumer information programs is only \$107.9 million, less than the economic cost of 110 highway deaths.<sup>9</sup> NHTSA's total budget decreased more than 36 percent, or over one-third, from 1980 to 2000 in

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<sup>3</sup> See United States General Accounting Office, "Research Continues on a Variety of Factors That Contribute to Motor Vehicle Crashes," GAO-03-436 (Mar. 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Statement of Marilena Amon, Acting Senior Associate Administrator, Traffic Injury Control, NHTSA, before the Subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives, Mar. 4, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety,

[http://www.saferoads.org/issues/is\\_NHTSAauthorization2003.htm#NHTSAResources](http://www.saferoads.org/issues/is_NHTSAauthorization2003.htm#NHTSAResources).

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/factsheets/childpas.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/duip/spotlite/chldseat.htm>; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Buckle Up America: Child passenger safety week, (2002),

[http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/airbags/buckleplan/CPS%20Week%20Planner\\_files/index.html](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/airbags/buckleplan/CPS%20Week%20Planner_files/index.html).

<sup>8</sup> See NHTSA, "The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000," DOT HS 809 446 (May 2002).

<sup>9</sup> See Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety,

[http://www.saferoads.org/issues/is\\_NHTSAauthorization2003.htm#NHTSAResources](http://www.saferoads.org/issues/is_NHTSAauthorization2003.htm#NHTSAResources).

1999 real dollars, although vehicle miles traveled and the U.S. population increased substantially over the same period.<sup>10</sup>

- Many basic safety standards are sorely in need of an upgrade, having been originally drafted in the 1960s and 1970s, and others are sorely needed, such as a side impact air bag standard, a minimum rollover prevention stability standard, a rollover crashworthiness standard, and a minimum standard for vehicle aggressivity and compatibility in multiple-vehicle collisions.

Contrary to your suggestion, gains in harm reduction on the highway have not stagnated due to our success with an easier list of items. Instead, our progress is now being reversed because the highway safety mission is severely underfunded and the auto industry has eroded the value of protections extended to car drivers by creating a class of vehicles – SUVs – with major hazards that remain entirely unregulated.

As a result of this neglect of safety, and the industry's decision to hype poorly designed SUVs and pickups, the vehicle mix on the roads is increasingly deadly. The failure of NHTSA to reduce rollover propensity with a minimum standard, and to develop meaningful crash protections to save lives in rollover crashes, are oversights of tragic proportions. The absence of these clearly available countermeasures drives up deaths in SUVs, while SUV and pickup truck aggressiveness in two-vehicle crashes drives up deaths in cars. These lethal forces will continue to undermine our overall progress in vehicle safety until they are fixed.

I would welcome your enthusiastic engagement in research on the growing threat posed by SUVs to the considerable achievements of the past three decades. Most unwelcome is your attitude of marked indifference, or even cynicism, in the face of this terrible news.

Sincerely,

Joan Claybrook  
President, Public Citizen

cc:

Dr. Jeffrey Runge, Administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration,  
Department of Transportation

Mary Sue Coleman, President, University of Michigan

Stephen W. Director, Dean of Engineering, University of Michigan

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<sup>10</sup> See Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, "NHTSA Historical Funding," Spring 2003.