Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers Dodges the Truth About SUV Dangers, Blames Victims of Crashes for Own Deaths

On April 23, 2003, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published preliminary estimates for 2002 traffic fatalities, revealing that SUV, pickup, and van deaths accounted for *more than half of the increase in total traffic deaths* in 2002.[1]

In news coverage, the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers blamed drivers for the high body count. Eron Shostek, spokesman for the Alliance, claimed in *The Washington Post* that, "If every SUV driver wore their belt, we'd save 1000 lives a year." He noted that alcohol related deaths rose, overall, in 2002.

Yet belt use and alcohol do not explain the harm caused by SUVs and other light trucks. The truth is that unsafe SUV vehicle design is to blame for the rapid increase in carnage in and from these vehicles. While some part of this increase may be attributed to the proliferation of light trucks on our highways, that proliferation also means that more people will be exposed to these hazard-ridden vehicles and at peril in crashes with them.

Between 1994, when the auto industry dissuaded NHTSA from developing a rollover propensity minimum standard, and 2002, 15,312 people have died in SUV rollovers alone.[2] This body count, nearly 2,000 people each year, could be lowered by improving rollover survivability and by lowering the rollover propensity of these tippy vehicles. Rather than chastising the public with an idealized level of safety belt use that is not achieved by any country in the world, the Alliance should ask its members to improve the deadly safety performance of its SUVs, making them more safe for their own occupants as well as other vehicles on the road.

Take away the industry counter-spin, and here are the facts:

SUV occupants are just as likely as car occupants to wear safety belts.

- NHTSA belt-use statistics show that 78 percent of SUV and van occupants and 77 percent of passenger car occupants wear their belts.[3]
- In fatal rollovers, the most deadly of crashes, SUV and passenger car belt-use rates are virtually identical, yet these crashes account for 61 percent of SUV occupant deaths and only 24 percent of car occupant deaths.[4]
- While it is a truism that higher belt use would save lives and is a laudable goal, vehicle design improvements would also go a long way toward better protecting both belted and unbelted occupants.
- Although 100 percent safety belt use would be ideal, no country in the world has achieved this level of belt use. For example, Canada's belt-use rate for occupants in passenger vehicles from 1999 to 2001 was 90 percent, giving it the highest belt-use rate in the world.[5] The belt-use rate in the U.S. in 2002 was 75 percent.[6]
- In fatal crashes, belt use rates for SUVs and cars are nearly identical. Although increasing, use rates are low, at around 40 percent, meaning that passive restraints play an invaluable role in protecting people in fatal crashes.

Car drivers are just as likely as SUV drivers to have been drinking in fatal crashes.

- Car and SUV drivers were just as likely to be drunk in fatal crashes – 23 percent of car drivers and 22 percent of SUV drivers had a Blood Alcohol Content level of above 0.08 in 2001 fatal crashes.[7]
- In 2002, the percentage of alcohol-related deaths for both SUV and car occupants was virtually the same – 40.9 percent and 40.0 percent respectively.[8]
- The number of SUV occupants who died in alcohol-related crashes rose in 2002, but because more people were driving SUVs in 2002 than in 2001, the rate of alcohol-related fatalities in SUVs relative to the population actually decreased. The rate of alcohol-related car fatalities increased relative to the number of cars in the vehicle fleet.[9]
- Pointing to overall alcohol increases is misleading because it fails to explain the increased deaths in light trucks that were highlighted by NHTSA's recent report.

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NHTSA's report did show that SUVs and pickup trucks continue to take more and more lives, virtually overwhelming all of the savings gained by increasing belt use and increasing fleet penetration of safety countermeasures like air bags.

In single-vehicle crashes, SUVs and other light truck rollovers continue to inflict a severe toll on their own passengers and drivers.

- According to NHTSA's most recent data, the increase in SUV and pickup rollover crash deaths accounted for 46 percent of the total increase in all passenger vehicle fatalities between 2001 and 2002. Furthermore, SUV and truck rollovers accounted for a whopping 78 percent of the increase in rollover-related occupant deaths.[10]
- SUV rollovers killed 2,353 occupants in 2002, 211 more than in 2001, representing a 9.9 percent increase. The 4.3 percent rise in passenger car rollover fatalities during these years accounts for an increase of 197 highway fatalities.[11] Notably, there are almost 6 times as many cars as there are SUVs on the road.[12]

In two-vehicle crashes, the incompatible design of SUVs and other light trucks continues to kill a disproportionate number of people in cars.

- NHTSA's most recent report also shows that, in two-vehicle crashes between light trucks and cars, for every one occupant death in a SUV, van or truck, there are four deaths in passenger cars. In 2002, 4,446 car occupants were killed in crashes with light trucks (including SUVs).[13]
- According to 1996 data, an estimated 2,000 lives would have been saved that year alone if the driver of the SUV, truck, or van had been driving *a car of the same weight as the light truck* instead of a light truck.[14] If only SUV drivers had chosen cars of the same weight instead of an SUV, 445 lives would have been saved.[15] These numbers would be considerably larger today, as there are approximately twice as many SUVs on the road now than in 1996.[16]

Endnotes

[1] Occupant fatalities in pickups, SUVs and vans accounted for 59 percent (an increase of 499 fatalities) of the increase in all motor vehicle occupant fatalities while fatalities in passenger cars in fact decreased (75 fewer deaths in 2002). National Center for Statistics *and* Analysis *Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2002* at 26.
[2] Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, Analysis of NHTSA SUV Rollover data.
[3] *See* National Center Statistics and Analysis, *Safety Belt and Helmet Use in 2002 – Overall Results*, Sept. 2002, at 8.
[4] National Center for Statistics and Analysis, *Characteristics of Rollover Crashes,* April 2002, at 47 and National Center for Statistics *and* Analysis *Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2002* at 50.
[5] *Results of Transport Canada's July 2001 Survey of Seat Belt Use in Canada*, October 2001.
[6] D. Glassbrenner, Safety Belt and Helmet Use in 2002 – Overall Results, NHTSA Technical Report, DOT HS 809 500, September 2002.
[7] National Center for Statistics and Analysis *Alcohol Involvement in Fatal Crashes 2001* at 9.
[8] National Center for Statistics and Analysis *Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2002* at 40.
[9] In 2001, the proportion of alcohol-related fatality was 41.9 percent for SUV occupants and 39.7 percent for car occupants. *See* National Center for Statistics and Analysis *Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2002* at 40.
[10] National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA), *Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2002*, at 51.
[11] *Id*. at 47.
[12] Statistics provided on 1992-2001 vehicle registration data from NCSA researcher to Public Citizen researcher March 2003.
[13] *Id.* at 55.
[14] Joksch, Hans C., "Vehicle Design versus Aggressivity," April 2002 at 41.
[15] Email from Hans Joksch to Laura MacCleery of Public Citizen, on February 24, 2003 (on file at Public Citizen).
[16] In 1996 there were 11,978,921 registered SUVs in the US. By 2001 that number had increased to 21,636,480 – almost 2 million new SUVs each year. *See* statistics provided on 1992-2001 vehicle registration data from NCSA to Public Citizen researcher Morgan Lynn, March 2003.