



Save a Life, Buy an SUV

by Peter VanDoren and Joseph G. Lehman

Summary

Many media pundits, political activists, and public officials are calling for taxes or restrictions on sales of what they view as “dangerous” sport utility vehicles (SUVs). New research shows, however, that motor vehicle fatalities decrease as more SUVs appear on American roads. This is not only good news for motorists, but also for the automakers that drive Michigan’s economy.

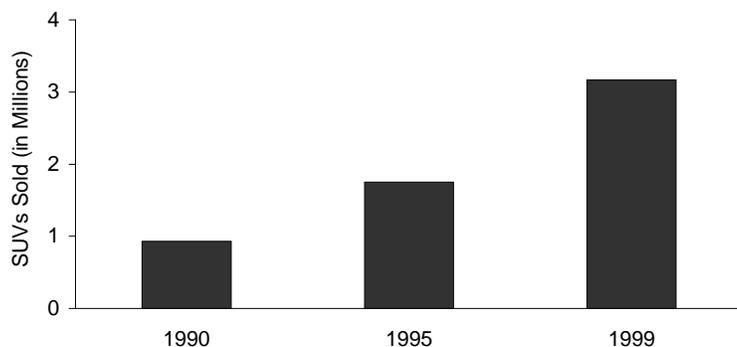
Main text word count: 711

“SUVs are hazardous to your health,” says Clarence Ditlow, director of the Center for Auto Safety. Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook advises consumers not to buy SUVs. In an ABC News report, Peter Jennings says the “government is grappling with what to do about the threat that sport utility vehicles represent to lesser vehicles in accidents.” And CBS’s Dan Rather reports that SUVs are considered a “killer on the road.”

Are SUVs really the highway menace portrayed by activists and the media? If they are, we’re not only in greater danger on the roads, but Michigan’s economy will suffer as consumer fears dry up the sales of popular vehicles. According to the latest research, though, safety is actually one reason to buy an SUV.

In the current issue of *Regulation* magazine, Douglas Coate and James VanderHoff of Rutgers University examine the relationship between traffic fatalities and “light truck” use from 1994 through 1997. In their initial analysis they found a positive correlation between light truck registrations and motor vehicle fatalities: The greater the number of light trucks in a state per licensed driver, the greater the fatality rate per licensed driver.

The Increasing Popularity of Sport Utility Vehicles



Source: Automotive News

SUV sales grow despite consumer activists who decry the vehicles' safety. Research shows that SUVs actually correlate to fewer traffic deaths.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data show that SUVs are involved in the bulk of rollover fatalities, which comprise nearly a quarter of annual U.S. traffic deaths. More than 60 percent of SUV fatalities are rollovers. Just 40 percent and 22 percent of pickup and car deaths, respectively, involve rollovers.

But when Coate and VanderHoff examined the vehicle registration and fatality data more carefully, they noticed that both light truck use and motor vehicle fatalities are more common in rural states. And sure enough, once they accounted for the characteristics of rural states, not only did the positive relationship between light truck use and fatalities disappear, it became negative.

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In other words, more SUVs mean fewer traffic deaths.

All told, the United States has experienced a nearly 50 percent drop in traffic fatalities per vehicle mile traveled during the past two decades. SUV critics are quick to dismiss the notion that larger vehicles deserve any credit for the decline. They point to stiffer penalties for drunk driving, increased seat belt use, the reintroduction of the 55 mph speed limit in some states, and safety-enhancing technological changes. But even after controlling for all those factors, Coate and VanderHoff find that SUVs have helped reduce fatalities.

Federal government safety data from other studies indicate a lower fatality rate for SUVs—1.6 per 100 million miles traveled—than for cars. Delving even deeper, Coate and VanderHoff find that the 5-percent increase in light truck purchases from 1994-97 has reduced single vehicle fatalities per driver by 7.5 percent and multiple vehicle fatalities per driver by 2 percent. That translates into about 2,000 lives saved in the United States.

But the findings are too much for some public-safety guardians. Claybrook, for example, dismissed the Rutgers study as “poppycock” and “statistical gymnastics.” She has not challenged the study’s methodology or offered any other substantive critique. She simply can’t accept the notion that as more people drive big, sturdy vehicles, fewer people die in traffic accidents.

The findings are obviously good news in terms of safety, but they are also good news in terms of the health of Michigan’s economy. Hundreds of thousands of Michigan workers are involved in producing autos for the world market, and SUVs have become the industry’s proverbial goose that laid the golden egg. SUVs accounted for 38.6 percent of truck sales in 1999, a year when more than 3.1 million new SUVs were sold. SUVs comprise 43 percent of the vehicles on the road today. In some years, Ford Explorers account for 20 percent of the company’s profit.

Explorer sales were even strong at the height of last year’s problems with Firestone tires. Sales dipped less than one percent in August of 2000 while news shows were airing scary footage of Explorer accidents and linking the tires to 88 deaths and 250 injuries.

Fortunately, Americans are paying more attention to their own positive experiences than to those who criticize SUVs for a living. They continue to buy SUVs and other light trucks in record numbers. They know instinctively what academic research is just now beginning to prove: SUVs make America’s roads safer.

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