

Rugged, popular and good looking: It's not me, it's my SUV

The safety of SUVs depends largely on who's driving, how they're driving and what they're colliding with

Before I moved from Vancouver, I witnessed an exercise in "group think" unlike anything I'd ever seen. Almost overnight, it seemed, the streets were full of very shiny, very new sport utility vehicles. It was a craze I never understood, since the most rugged terrain the vast majority of those drivers ever encountered was a pothole or a KOA campground.

The incredible "overnight" popularity of SUVs had actually been predicted many years ago. The prediction came from the law of demographics, which basically says that two thirds of everything that happens is demographically-driven, and can be predicted by anyone who understands how the largest demographic base thinks at any age.

Which, of course, are the baby boomers. Once the boomers' kids moved out, the minivan became very uncool to drive.

Enter the Sport Utility Vehicle. It didn't look like a van; hey, the first word in the model name was "sport!"



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It was the perfect vehicle to solve the mid-life crisis of a generation used to starting trends, not following them.

Everybody wants one

From there the popularity of the vehicle ballooned from one target generation to the entire vehicle market.

And why shouldn't they be popular? They are the safest vehicles on the road, right?

Well, that depends on who's driving, how they're driving and whom they're colliding with.

Did you know that every SUV comes with a sticker mounted near the driver that says:

"This is a multipurpose passenger

vehicle which will handle and manoeuvre differently from an ordinary passenger car, in driving conditions which may occur on streets and highways and off road. As with other vehicles of this type, if you make sharp turns or abrupt manoeuvres, the vehicle may roll over or may go out of control and crash. You should read driving guidelines and instructions in the Owner's Manual, and wear your seatbelt at all times."

That's sobering, isn't it? It surprised me, simply because it's the first time I've heard of a mainstream automobile that came with a warning sticker.

Looks can be deceiving

It's ironic considering that, according to many SUV manufacturers, one of the most common reasons people give for choosing the vehicle is that they believe they're safer than other vehicles. Their rugged looks alone imply they should be safer than most

types of vehicles.

Well, looks can deceive. The safety record of SUVs has been spotty. Their high centre of gravity, according to many safety experts, makes them less stable than cars. In fact, SUVs are three times more likely to roll over than other vehicles.

In particular, drivers of smaller SUVs are involved in more fatal rollover accidents than any other type of vehicle. Since these small SUVs are very popular with young drivers, it sadly follows that these young drivers are statistically most likely to be involved in a rollover.

Consumer Reports has offered another perspective. Since many SUVs have rigid frames and high bumpers, and weigh much more than similar-sized cars, occupants in smaller vehicles are immediately exposed to a greater risk if the two vehicles collide. An SUV can override a car's bumpers and simply crush the passenger

compartment. And, since SUVs tend to be higher from the ground, a side impact with another vehicle is particularly lethal, with the harder bumper material pushing into the soft door panels.

Please, SUV drivers, think very carefully how you're driving. Like it or not, you have an extra responsibility on the road; if you collide with a driver in a smaller car, they are four times more likely to be killed than you are. Sure, you are probably safer in your SUV (assuming you're driving it correctly) but you pose an incredible risk to others on the road if you're driving irresponsibly.

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

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