

Late '60s, 70s Cars Seen Safer

By Thomas Crosby
Washington Star Staff Writer

If you're involved in a automobile accident, your chances of survival are at least 39 percent better if you drive a car built after 1964, according to a study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

A non-profit organization, the institute studied all accidents in the state of Maryland from 1972 to 1975 in an effort to determine if federal automobile safety standards reduced the number of deaths of drivers and passengers in automobile accidents.

The study found that prior to 1964 when cars were sold without any state or federal safety regulations the average car occupant deaths per year was 44 per 100,000 registered cars.

For federally regulated cars built after 1967 the average car occupant deaths per year was 27 per 100,000 registered cars or 39 percent less than pre-1964 models.

IN THE last two years there has been an ongoing controversy over the effect of federal safety regulations pertaining to motor

vehicles. A study done a year ago by Chicago economists concluded that federal motor vehicle safety regulations has no effect on the safety of car occupants in a crash.

The insurance institute's study was done by Leon S. Robertson, who holds a Ph.D in behavioral science.

Prior to his report, Robertson said, "no study had adequately separated vehicles subject to automobile safety standards from other vehicles operated on the road in exactly the same period in order to assess the overall effect of regulation on different types of fatalities."

Since 1967 federal law has required that all new cars have such things as seat belts, outside rear view mirrors, stronger windshields, energy absorbing steering assemblies and better crash resistant door locks.

ROBERSTON said that while younger people normally drive older cars that the age of the drivers had no effect on the accident rates.

In addition even though the decade-old cars might be expected to be involved in more accidents due to deterioration, Robertson noted that the average fatality rate per year per 100,000 passenger cars nationally during 1960 to 1963 was 44, the same rate found for pre-1964 cars in his study.

"In some," said Robertson, "careful research methods . . . reveal that, in the aggregate, the state and federal motor vehicle safety regulations . . . have greatly reduced automobile occupant fatality."

While there was a difference in fatality rates for car occupants, the study also found that there was no difference in pedestrian deaths among unregulated or federally regulated cars.

"REGULATIONS promulgated thus far have had no apparent effect on pedestrian fatality rate." Pedestrian fatalities per 100,000 registered cars averaged eight yearly for pre-1964 model cars and either 10 or nine fatalities yearly per 100,000 registered cars for post-1964 models.

The study concluded by stating that the federal safety regulations are the "beginning of a process to minimize the toll in human life that accompanies motor vehicle use."

The insurance institute, formed to help reduce the losses resulting from motor vehicle accidents, on many occasions has been extremely critical of the Federal Highway Administration for failing to strictly enforce national motor vehicle safety laws.

Greater car safety in reach, but cost a hurdle

By Robert M. Press

Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Atlanta

Federal automobile safety standards saved some 37,000 lives between 1975 and 1978, according to a new study by a Yale University auto safety expert.

But federal figures show that some 52,000 persons still die each year in motor vehicle crashes — more than the number of Americans killed during the entire US involvement in Vietnam.

Some safety experts contend that as many as half of those fatalities could be avoided by applying known safety technology to vehicles, more strictly enforcing drunk-driving laws, removing more roadside hazards, and in some cases having less — not more — student driver education.

The auto industry, facing increasingly stiff competition from Japanese imports, continues to balk at the idea of more federal safety regulations that, industry officials say, will add unnecessarily to the cost of US-made cars and may not be effective anyway.

The Reagan administration is caught in the middle of the debate with a federal decision pending on whether to rescind a regulation requiring passive restraints (air bags or automatic seat belts) in all cars by model year 1984.

Air bags are at the top of the list of known safety measures that, if applied, could "reduce the fatalities (from vehicle crashes) by way over half," says William Haddon Jr., president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

But air bags, says Ford Motor's safety director Roger Maugh, "will not be an effective market option because they are too expensive," he told a recent hearing of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

An internal NHTSA document recently made public by the private Center for Auto Safety shows a "confidential" estimate by Ford Motor Company that it would cost \$101 per vehicle if 385,000 of its 1982 model cars were equipped with air bags. A Ford Motor spokesman denies such fig-

ures were provided and says Ford estimates it would cost an additional \$600 to equip some 800,000 new cars with air bags.

The NHTSA estimates the cost of air-bags to range from \$300 to \$400, says NHTSA assistant administrator for rulemaking Michael Finkelstein. "We're all enamored with air bags," he said of NHTSA's technical staff.

Most auto manufacturers have chosen to meet the federal "passive restraint" regulation with automatic seat belts that customers can detach. With fewer than 15 percent of US drivers using the current nonautomatic seat belts, Mr. Finkelstein wonders how many will use the automatic ones. If the estimates are low, then Reagan administration officials must determine what is a "reasonable payoff to society" for the added cost in deciding whether to delay or cancel the regulation.

NHTSA is also studying ways to strengthen the sides of cars to protect passengers and cushion front-end designs to help protect pedestrians.

According to Leon S. Robertson in the recently released Yale study, federal safety measures saved the lives of 26,500 passengers, 7,800 pedestrians, 1,000 bicyclists, and 2,000 motorcyclists in the years 1975-78. Additional federal measures are needed but not likely to occur under the Reagan administration, he says.

Among needed measures, according to Mr. Haddon, are:

- Revised windshield standards to allow a safer kind widely used in Europe. (The NHTSA is studying the European product.)

- A brake light on top of the car trunk, a measure studies have shown reduces rear-end collisions by one-half.

- Tougher enforcement of drunk-driving laws. A drivers' perceived risk of apprehension, not the stiffness of penalties, is the best deterrent, he says.

- Review of student driver education. A study in Connecticut shows that when fewer courses were offered, fewer youths obtained licenses and the number of deaths was thereby reduced. Older students are more mature and are better drivers, says Haddon.



By Peter Main, staff photographer

Auto safety rules may take new turn

Auto Safety

RESEARCH FINDS 37,000 LIVES SAVED BY FEDERAL AUTOMOBILE SAFETY RULES

Federal automobile safety standards saved 37,000 lives between 1975 and 1978, according to a study sponsored by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The research, conducted by Leon S. Robertson of Yale University, found "substantial reductions" in car occupant deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled for passenger cars built after the initial federal vehicle safety standards took effect. Robertson also reported reductions in fatal collisions of automobiles with pedestrians, motorcyclists, and bicyclists.

Using data obtained from the Fatal Accident Reporting System of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Robertson studied 236,205 vehicles, their drivers, and occupants and nonoccupants killed in crashes involving the vehicles. He estimated that deaths avoided by the federal standards in those years amounted to 26,500 occupants, 7,600 pedestrians, 1,000 "pedalcyclists," and 2,000 motorcyclists.

Robertson also contended that economic savings from the federal standards have been substantially greater than their costs. According to Robertson, "A former automobile company executive who developed a research safety vehicle that provides crashworthiness far in excess of any proposed standard has estimated that, in mass production, the car could be profitably marketed at about the cost of currently priced compact cars. "Apparently, the cost of these innovations does not explain their lack of availability in the market. Other explanations involving ideology and management norms may be more plausible," he said.

Copies of the report, "Automobile Safety Regulations and Death Reductions in the United States," are available from IIHS, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 20037.

Money saved, too U.S. auto standards reduce death toll

Stringent federal automobile safety standards saved some 37,000 lives between 1975 and 1978, according to a study commissioned by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The study, conducted by Leon S. Robertson of Yale, showed that there were substantial reductions in car occupant deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled for passenger cars built after the initial federal vehicle safety standards took effect.

Robertson studied data from the Fatal Accident Reporting System of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration covering 236,205 vehicles, their drivers, and occupants and nonoccupants killed in crashes involving the vehicles

over the four-year period. Robertson estimated that the numbers of deaths saved by the federal standards during the period included 26,500 people in vehicles, 7,600 pedestrians, 1,000 pedalcyclists, and 2,000 motorcyclists.

Robertson also said that economic savings from the federal standards have exceeded their costs. He also noted that a former auto executive who developed a research safety vehicle that provides crashworthiness far in excess of any proposed standard has estimated that, "in mass production, the car could be profitably marketed at about the cost of currently priced compact cars.

"Apparently," he continued, "the cost of these innovations does not explain their

lack of availability in the market. Other explanations involving ideology and management norms may be more plausible."

Robertson's new findings about passenger car occupant fatality rates confirm trends he found in a 1976 study.

A more modest reduction in fatalities for truck occupants per 100 million miles was shown in the new study. (Trucks have remained exempt from many vehicle standards.)

Copies of the current study, "Automobile Safety Regulations and Death Reductions in the United States," are available from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 20037.

DON'T BAG THE BAGS

Because of improvements in auto safety, tens of thousands of Americans are alive today. Tens of thousands more are not maimed or crippled.

Important features that we now take for granted -- safety glass, seat belts, and stronger tires, for example -- are big life-savers. The consumer's interest in safety, I think, is shown by the broad acceptance of such features. What motorist would consider buying a car without safety glass? The answer: virtually none, because consumers are excellent judges of their own interests.

Although lives have been saved, an appalling number of lives are being lost. Auto accidents are the leading cause of death among Americans under the age of 35. In 1980, more than 53,000 men, women, and children died in auto accidents; more than 2,000,000 others suffered disabling injury. Each year, more Americans die on the roads than were killed in Vietnam. The yearly highway toll is nearly double the loss of life to homicide.

Missouri is a major automobile producing state. I have pressed hard for measures to strengthen the auto industry. I believe strongly in the industry's future. I am certain the industry can succeed in the massive job of retooling and modernization -- Chrysler's recent completion of its \$75 million renovation of its Fenton plant proves the job can be done.

I am equally confident that a solid future for the industry must include a strong commitment to auto safety. Our increasing dependency on small autos means a significant rise in death and injury -- unless the U.S. Department of Transportation proceeds with the existing standard for improved crash protection. Already, the new rule has been delayed for a year.

To modify the timing of the new rule -- which would require automatic crash protection, in the form of self-fastening seat belts or air cushions that inflate instantly upon impact -- might be acceptable. To drop the standard entirely is absolutely unacceptable.

The basic argument against the new safety standard is that it would take resources away from modernization. At the very most, another one-year roll-back in the standard would save \$50 million. But the industry must invest up to \$70 billion by 1985 in new plant and equipment. The cost of the safety device is a drop in the bucket, coming at a time when smaller cars will raise the death and injury rate.

The fact of the matter is that crash protection works. An exhaustive study by Leon Robertson of Yale University found that crash protection requirements already in force saved 37,000 lives between 1975 and 1978. The new standard could prevent at least 9,000 deaths annually.

As Chairman of the Senate's Surface Transportation Subcommittee, I have consistently opposed weakening the new safety standard. Congress must be prepared to act if NHTSA moves to weaken the public's protection. The safety of life and limb, in my view, should not be an option, like body styling. It should be a basic commitment of national policy.

We know how to save lives and prevent injuries. The job can be done, and done at an affordable cost. It is the duty of Congress to see that the job keeps getting done.

Car-safety push slowing?

By AMY GOLDSTEIN
Ledger-Star Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — On a movie screen in a darkened hearing room at the Department of Transportation, a 5-year-old boy teetered on a tricycle at precisely 5 mph as consumer advocates, insurance and automobile company representatives and government officials looked on.

A 2½-year-old then toddled across the screen, a placard fastened to his back attesting that the pace of his unsteady steps was 2.5 mph.

The children in the film, son and nephew of researchers at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, interjected a light note into a deadly serious hearing last month into a proposed reduction in the federal requirements for the durability of car bumpers.

The federal government is contemplating reducing from 5 mph to 2½ mph the speed of the collisions a bumper must be able to withstand.

The tricycle rider and the toddler, said Ben Kelley, the Insurance Institute's senior vice president, demonstrated graphically just how slow those speeds are.

But imbedded in the bit of theatrics is a deeper point.

Such presentations reflect the alarm with which consumer and safety advocates and insurance officials view what they call a burgeoning love affair between the federal government and the automobile industry.

After more than a decade of increasingly stringent governmental demands that American car manufacturers shore up safety standards, the federal agency responsible for highway safety is easing up.

"The auto industry wants the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to be a wholly owned subsidiary, and they're ready, willing and able," said Joan Claybrook, former head of the safety agency under the Carter administration.

"It's a symbiotic relationship — Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee," Ms. Claybrook said in an interview.

While she was at the helm, the agency sought to bolster safety by tinkering with the automobile itself. If cars were safer, the theory ran, automobiles and human bodies would be damaged less severely when the inevitable accidents occur.

And the lever for ensuring that cars became safer was regulation of the auto companies.

"Joan's inclination was 'When in doubt, regulate,'" claims Barry Felrice, NHTSA's associate administrator for plans and programs.

But today, in keeping with philosophy pervading the Reagan administration, the theory at NHTSA is that "regulation is the last thing one does," Felrice said.

Reverting to thinking prevalent until the late 1960s, the agency now is exhorting the public to drive more cautiously and urging automobile companies voluntarily to make their cars safer — the tack manufacturers have advocated for years.

In addition, since the Reagan administration took office, car manufacturers and federal officials say they have met more frequently and more freely exchanged research. Senior government highway safety officials have been spending more time in Michigan as well.

"All indications are they're listening to our side of the argument," said Mark Cocroft, spokesman for the General Motors Corp. "That wasn't always the case."

And, of the auto companies, NHTSA spokesman Edmund Pinto said, "I think they like us better now."

But consumer and insurance groups are sputtering. The decline in regulation will prompt a spurt in deaths and injuries, they contend.

"Unfortunately, this administration seems to need a body count," said Clarence Ditlow III, director of the Center for Auto Safety in Washington. "You ought to rename it the National Highway Traffic Fatality Administration."

Certain figures underscore his words. A study by Yale researcher, Leon S. Robertson, examining the fatality rates in cars before and after NHTSA began to regulate car safety, estimated that 37,000 lives were saved in the United States between 1975 and 1978 because of the federal standards.

"People who are very much for regulation are indeed depressed by the current administration," Felrice admitted.

What Cocroft called "a new mood" flowing from Washington has prompted auto companies to intensify their traditionally ill-heeded pleas for sympathy — with striking results.

Last spring, manufacturers flooded Washington with so-called "wish lists" of regulations they wanted purged.

Miss Claybrook said similar lists have trickled into Washington over the past three years.

But what is new, Felrice said, is the number of requests and the fact they were sent, not just to the safety agency, but to the Office of Management and Budget and the vice president.

"We've always sought public comment," Felrice said. "But in this case, the agency didn't have to say, 'Send your cards and letters, folks.' The letters came pouring in."

The first response from the federal government was an April 6 report from a White House task force examining the economic plight of car manufacturers.

Entitled "Actions to Help the U.S. Auto Industry," the report recommended 17 safety rules and 18 environmental requirements whose elimination the document predicted "will result in considerable savings in capital costs to the industry and even greater savings to consumers."

Half a year later, many of the wishes of Detroit have been, or appear about to be, granted.

The most recent and dramatic step was NHTSA's abandonment last month of the requirement that, starting next year, cars be equipped with air bags or automatic seat belts.

The "passive restraint" standard — so named because car occupants would no longer actively have had to fasten a seat belt themselves — was a major thrust of Miss Claybrook's administration and had long been a thorn in the side of the automobile companies.

Pinto said the agency is sifting through its entire body of proposed and current car safety standards to reshuffle its priorities.

The process itself is not new.

"Anytime you get a new administration, they say, 'Hey, the last turkeys didn't know how to do it, and they reinvent the wheel,'" said R. Clarke Bennett, the head of safety program evaluation for the Federal Highways Administration. "There may be some of that going on."

But with this administration, there may be something else as well.

"I don't think you're going to see a single safety measure coming out of this agency," Ditlow predicted.

Whether his prediction is borne out, it is clear already that air bags are simply the most glaring of a rash of current and proposed safety standards that already have been whittled or seem likely to be eliminated.

Existing standards that have been rescinded include a regulation to make sure car windows are designed so that drivers can see clearly out of them.

Current regulations under consideration to be weakened or abandoned include:

★ The requirement that car bumpers withstand a 5 mph collision with no damage to the car. NHTSA is contemplating reducing the standard to 2.5 mph in front and/or back — or eliminating the rule entirely.

Continued on page 2

Study Finds Safety Rules Have Cut Auto Death Rate

Passenger cars manufactured in compliance with federal and earlier state safety standards have shown "substantial reductions in occupant fatality rates," the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported Monday.

The institute claimed that its study for the first time demonstrates the improvement in fatality rates since safety regulations were imposed on passenger cars.

Among the findings of the study, performed for several insurance associations and individual companies, were these:

- Cars sold prior to the beginning of state or federal regulation (prior to 1964) had an average yearly occupant fatality rate of 44 per 100,000 registered cars.

- Cars with front lap belts required by state law (in Maryland on which the study

was based) averaged 35 occupant deaths per 100,000 registered cars, 20 percent less than pre-1964 cars.

- For federally regulated (post-1967) cars, occupant deaths averaged 27 per 100,000 cars yearly, 23 percent less than 1964-1967 models and 39 percent less than pre-1964 models.

In the research, data on all reported fatal crashes in Maryland were obtained from state police records for 1972-1975. In each calendar year, occupant fatalities per 100,000 registered vehicles were determined for the various car models involved.

Commenting on the results of the study, Leon S. Robertson, the institute's senior behavioral scientist said:

"These regulations are not the end, but the beginning of a process to minimize the toll in human life that accompanies motor vehicle use."

A Perspective on Regulation

ONE OF THE MORE COMMON complaints of the automobile industry is that federal safety and environmental regulations are both an impediment to the manufacturer's progress and a bother to the customers. The government, in short, ought to be less meddlesome.

The industry's argument is topical in light of a recent study by Leon S. Robertson of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. He presents some data that argue persuasively that such laws as the 1966 National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act have been consistently effective. According to Mr. Robertson and the institute, cars sold prior to the establishment of certain safety laws "had an average yearly occupant fatality rate of 44 per 100,000 registered cars." These were models prior to 1964. The cars made after seat belts were required (1964 to 1967 models), and which had the benefit of other mandated protections, "averaged 35 occupant deaths per 100,000 registered cars, 20 per cent less than pre-1964 cars." In addition, "for federally regulated post-1967 cars, occupant deaths averaged 27 per 100,000 cars yearly, 23 per cent less than the 1964-1967 models and 39 per cent less than the pre-1964 models."

Such figures represent more than a few Americans saved from highway death. At the time such safety devices as seat belts were required as standard equipment, the manufacturers complied only after years of resistance and refusal. The manufacturers offered

no leadership, and only reluctantly followed. It has been a consistent pattern.

If another pattern is noticeable it is the complaint that when car sales are down it is because of all those regulations imposed by the government. This issue came up last October when the Senate Commerce Committee questioned Judith T. Connor after she was proposed for the job of Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Environment, Safety and Consumer Affairs. Sen. Vance Hartke (D-Ind.) told of visiting a Ford Motor Company plant in his home/state: "I was rather amused when they presented a film in which the president of the Ford Motor Company blamed the government totally for the lack of sales. He claimed that government standards, especially in the field of safety and environment, were the principal causes of the most disastrous year in automobile sales since 1963." Sen Hartke asked Mrs. Connor if she shared that view. She said she did not: "I think that there is a misimpression regarding the impact of safety standards on sales. We also have a downturn in the economy, and it would be my guess that the downturn has more to do with the automobile sales than the activity of the federal government in the area of safety controls or environmental controls." Sen. Hartke went on to note that 1973, "the year in which we had the highest sales of automobiles in history," was also the year in which "most of the standards" went into effect.
