

TABLE 1—Number of People Killed Traveling in Toyota Vehicles in the United States, 2000–2009

	Toyota	Lexus ^a	Total
Drivers killed	14 946	910	15 856
Passengers killed	6283	435	6718
Total vehicle occupants killed	21 229	1345	22 574

Note. The data in this table do not provide any information on the safety of Toyota vehicles relative to other vehicles. The data reflect mainly the numbers of Toyota vehicles on the roads and how they are driven. The same data show additionally more than 3000 pedestrians killed in crashes involving Toyotas in the 2000–2009 decade. Massive media publicity was given to the allegation that in this same decade sudden unintended acceleration was a factor in 19 deaths.

Source. US Department of Transportation Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS).
^aToyota luxury brand.

vehicle in response to other claims.⁸ Those familiar with the subject (and a similar 1985 Audi 500 case) knew the search was futile. Identical vehicles sold outside the United States did not exhibit the alleged hazard.

WHY SCIENCE IS NOT RELEVANT TO POLICYMAKING

Over the decade in which 19 people were killed in crashes for which a sticky Toyota pedal was identified as one factor, 419 483 people died on the roads of the United States. Yet the US Congress, responsible for the nation’s laws, grandstands 19 deaths while almost ignoring 419 483. US policy is driven not by science, nor even by bare facts or even simple arithmetic, but by financial gain for lawyers.

The money paid out by Toyota for sudden acceleration claims includes, as just one item, a \$1.6 billion settlement of a class-action suit,⁹ with a final total estimated at \$3.1 billion. Plaintiffs’ lawyers likely pocket more than a billion dollars. Settlement details are kept secret—yet another example of “damn the public interest” in favor of lawyers’ interests. The recipients of such largess are well

situated to contribute to the politicians who created and maintain this killing system. The problem is not so much the lawyers doing lawyering, but the lawyer legislators making laws that benefit themselves but plunder and kill their constituents.

The Role of Media

The Toyota case is an example of the way the media misinforms the public that safety has to do with vehicles. Even more harmful is the almost daily bombardment under the banner of “safety,” of stories like “A million xyz manufacturer vehicles were recalled because of a safety defect in such and such a system. No injuries are reported.” Of what possible relevance to safety can this be to citizens in a nation in which 90 people are killed daily, and around 3000 injured?

How US Safety Policy Is Made

Influence on policy is largely a question of lobbying with cash. The legislators are themselves nearly all lawyers and sympathetic to the arguments and interests of other lawyers.

NHTSA employs many excellent, indeed some outstanding, safety scientists. Yet, in late 2013,¹⁰ the most senior traffic

safety official in the United States, the NHTSA Administrator, is a lawyer. His boss, the Secretary of Transportation, is a lawyer (married to another lawyer), and his boss, the President of the United States, is a lawyer (married to another lawyer). What they all additionally have in common is that none has any technical qualification.

Goals and skills of lawyers and scientists are fundamentally opposite. The duty of an “ethical” lawyer is to persuade others to favor their clients’ position, regardless of its justice, logic, or merits, or whether it harms the public.

It is not necessary for policymakers to be technical. However, for technical subjects like traffic safety, they should recognize, respect, and seek technical expertise, and should favor interventions that scientific research shows will improve public health.

HOW TO REDUCE TRAFFIC DEATHS

The finding¹ of 20 000 additional American deaths was based on comparisons with other countries. All countries fall well short of ideal. Laws in democracies are made by legislators keenly interested in being re-elected. The better performing countries support traffic safety research institutions and take seriously the scientific knowledge they provide. Their top safety officials are often a members of the same scientific community to which I belong. Their citizens are more likely to have a reasonable understanding of what is important to traffic safety than are Americans.

Since the terrorist attacks that killed 3000 Americans on

September 11, 2001, deaths on US airlines have been rare events, averaging less than 20 per year. Since that date, more than 450 000 Americans have been killed in traffic crashes, including more than 8000 children aged seven years or younger. When 20 children of similar age were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School, President Obama became prominently involved, as he did again on the one-year anniversary of the tragedy. Yet there is little governments can do to protect against deranged gunmen. They strike in many countries, the largest loss of life being a 2011 incident in Norway.

In sharp contrast, every aspect of traffic involves government. Governments design and build roads, regulate and inspect vehicles, pass and enforce traffic laws, and license and discipline drivers. It is government’s responsibility to take unremarkable steps that already apply in other countries to prevent the deaths of 20 000 Americans (including more than 300 children aged seven years or younger).

Traffic deaths can be sharply reduced by sensible traffic laws sensibly enforced for a public aware that by far the biggest risk to them and their families is from vehicular traffic.³ At core is the sober driver problem. Speed is key—modest speed reductions produce large risk reductions. If alcohol were eliminated completely we would still kill more than 20 000 per year. Speeders can be restrained by radar speed detection technology already successfully deployed in some countries. The goal must be to reduce injuries by preventing speeding, not to punish speeders.

US safety policy continues to be a public health catastrophe. Government and other institutions

(media, insurance industry, and auto industry) endlessly reinforce that traffic safety is largely about vehicles. This orgy of toxic misinformation causes massive death and injury. Science shows that traffic safety is overwhelmingly about road-user behavior. The United States can make sharp reductions in casualties only when public policy loudly proclaims this in law and daily media coverage. ■

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This editorial was accepted February 3, 2014.

doi:10.2105/AJPH.2014.301919

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