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Commentary: SUV Fatalities Are on a Roll, Both Backward and Forward

BYLINE: By PAUL MULSHINE. Paul Mulshine is a columnist for The Star-Ledger of Newark, N.J.

I get a lot of laughs out of the SUV craze. But the latest development on the SUV front isn't so funny.

It's called the "front-over."

Just what is a front-over? Simple. It's the opposite of a "back-over."

You might not be familiar with that term either. A "back-over" is what happens when a parent, having bought a giant SUV presumably for the safety of the kids, inadvertently runs over one while backing out of the driveway. A front-over is the same phenomenon, only in this case the driver is moving forward. In both cases, the blind spots caused by the massive size of the vehicles make them a danger to all around them.

I discussed this the other day with Janette Fennell, co-founder with her husband of a group called Kids and Cars. The group's original goal, back in that golden era before SUVs, was to protect children from the inattentiveness of adults who leave them in vehicles that are in the hot sun or have motors running. Over the past few years, however, the group has been fighting a much deadlier menace to children caused by the emergence of the SUV: In many cases, it is almost impossible to back an SUV up safely because of the huge blind spot to its rear.

"The biggest offender is the Jeep Commander at 69 feet," said Fennell the other day when I called her at her office in Kansas. Fennell described how on a recent trip to the Consumer Reports testing site in Connecticut, she got a chance to try out some big SUVs. In the Jeep, she found that she could not see a 28-inch traffic cone placed a full 69 feet behind it.

Many other SUVs are almost as bad, she said. The result is that some owners run over their own children in driveways. The federal government doesn't track these accidents because they tend to occur on private property, not public highways. So several years ago Kids and Cars began putting together a database on back-overs.

"About three years ago, we saw this huge increase in kids getting backed over," she said. "It came from nowhere and spiked very quickly. In fact, I just got a call about another death in North Carolina."

Her figures show that at least 50 children are backed over every week in the United States. "The numbers are probably bigger, but we don't have the data," she said. The group relies on informal reports from the media and police.

"Then last year I started to see this trend in front-overs," said Fennell. She said Hummers and other giant SUVs are so high off the ground that the driver can't see six to nine feet in front.

The group's Web site is filled with photos of the children who have died in such accidents. I feel sorry for the kids, but I'm not so sympathetic to their parents. As a car driver, I have nearly been run off the road many times by rude and incompetent SUV drivers. If these people are family-oriented, why don't they just drive minivans?

That question was addressed by Keith Bradsher, author of the anti-SUV book "High and Mighty." Bradsher quoted a GM vehicle development engineer, Fred Schaafsma, on the difference between those who buy minivans and those who buy SUVs.

"Minivan people want to be in control in terms of safety, being able to park and maneuver in traffic, being

able to get elderly people in and out," Schaafsma said. "SUV owners want to be more like 'I'm in control of the people around me.'"

Fennell puts it this way: "Their attitude is that 'If I'm in a car accident, my family needs to be protected and the heck with the other guy.'"

As the other guy in this equation, I long for the days when such characters would have had to content themselves with a big sedan or station wagon. But our federal government, in its wisdom, has effectively outlawed station wagons. A station wagon that got, say, 16 miles per gallon would be subjected to a big "gas-guzzler" tax. But an 11 mpg Hummer not only is exempt from the gas-guzzler tax; it also qualifies for tax breaks that can knock thousands of dollars off the purchase price.

It would seem a simple matter to reverse these regulations and tax breaks to favor cars and station wagons over SUVs and pickup trucks. Fuel economy would skyrocket and fatalities would plummet.

But Detroit would go out of business. The cars the Big Three build these days are so bad that the only way they can survive is through buying off politicians to retain these regulations.

Now that really is funny assuming, of course, you're an Arab oil baron or a Japanese automaker.

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