

Road Warrior: Jury's still out on rearview cameras

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After four years of false starts, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood last week came close to asking Congress to force automakers to mandate rearview cameras on all new cars, a feature designed to save 100 lives a year — half of them toddlers killed by cars backing out of driveways.



MARKO GEORGIEV/ STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER - Patricia A. Juillet, 52, demonstrates the rearview camera on her car in Mahwah.

But LaHood delayed a plan that, if approved, would have taken effect with 2014 models. The reason: Detroit is balking at a safety proposal that some say tops \$2.7 billion.

Is saving 100 lives worth \$160 to \$200 per camera system?

North Jersey statistics are scant. Two deaths of 2-year-olds in [Wayne](#) in 2000 and 2003. Last year, a man killed his wife while backing into a space near his [Clifton](#) home and an 11-year-old girl was pinned under a car in the parking lot of her [Nutley](#) school. In 2010, four teens were hurt when a woman tried to back into a [Tenafly](#) parking space.

If you're Conrad Macina, who still remembers a high school classmate who accidentally killed a child playing in a driveway, the cost is cheap enough. "I'd gladly pay to spare the kind of torment that my friend, her family and neighbors went through," said the Mount Arlington reader.

But Bill McCauley's experience suggests otherwise. "I've been hit by people who never even used their rear view mirror," the [Wyckoff](#) reader recalled. "What makes you assume careless people would use a camera?" "Kids should be attended by parents," said [Clifton](#)'s Cynthia Kester, "not left in driveways."

Only 200 to 300 "back-over" deaths occur each year compared to the 33,000 killed on public roads. Half are children, and usually a parent or relative is driving. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're negligent, said Janette Fennell of KidsAndCars.org, a group that tracks these deaths.

"Parents can turn their backs the moment a child does something unexpected, such as opening a kitchen door they never opened before," said Fennell, recalling a pediatrician who always backed into his Long Island driveway to ensure that he would leave his garage driving forward. "He checked behind his SUV before backing up, but that's when his 2-year-old ran behind it."

The 2002 death of this child, Cameron Gulbransen, inspired Congress to pass a 2008 law that directed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to set rules for rear visibility. Another inspiration was a KidsAndCars public service announcement showing how 62 kids fit behind an SUV without being seen by rearview mirrors.

As vehicle size has grown, blind zones have expanded, observed auto safety advocate Clarence Ditlow. "Although strides were made to protect drivers and passengers," said Ditlow, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Auto Safety, "hardly anything has been done to protect pedestrians." While traffic deaths have plummeted nationally, pedestrian deaths have dropped at a much slower pace. NHTSA regulators said studies show that about 100 annual deaths and half the 17,000 injuries attributed to "back-overs" could be avoided by eliminating blind zones. At first, automakers appeared to endorse this safety measure.

For the 2012 model year, 45 percent of American vehicles offer rearview cameras as standard equipment, according to Edmunds.com.

"I love mine," said [Mahwah](#)'s Patricia Juillet, who drives a new Mercedes E350. "It's helpful in parking lots where people walk and talk on cellphones."

Would beepers help? "Who'd pay attention to them in a big parking lot when dozens of people are backing out of spaces?" said Ditlow.

Would everyone use them? Experts say no, but lots of drivers don't use many safety devices. Does that mean carmakers should stop installing turn signals and rearview mirrors?

"The only people who'd object are funeral directors and body-shop owners," said [Ridgewood](#) reader Mel Freedenberg.

http://www.northjersey.com/news/transportation/030312_Road_Warrior_Jurys_still_out_on_rearview_cameras.html