

Road Warrior: Battling for rearview cameras - again

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If you bought a new car recently, there's about a 50-50 chance that you can see where you're going better than ever when you back out of your driveway.

That's because automakers voluntarily equipped 45 percent of last year's models — and presumably more this year — with rearview video cameras as standard features, according to automotive website Edmunds.com. These devices aren't frivolous or redundant accessories designed mostly for our comfort or enjoyment.

Far from it: Unlike traditional rearview mirrors, they cover the 20-by-10-foot "blind zone" where more than 18,000 people are injured and roughly 200 are killed each year because drivers simply didn't see them, said the U.S. Department of Transportation in a 2011 report.

Most of the victims were either very young — like the two 2-year-olds killed in [Wayne](#) in 2000 and 2003 — or very old, like the 90-year-old woman who was killed in [Lodi](#) last month when a pickup truck backed over her near an outdoor garbage bin.

In about 70 percent of such accidents, family members were behind the wheel.

So, if your family includes loved ones in these age groups, you might be wondering why ALL cars don't include cameras that allow drivers to see what's behind them — fully and clearly.

That's the same question that safety experts and families of victims have been asking since 2008, when President George W. Bush signed a law calling for an expansion of rear-visibility requirements, which — given current technology — means cameras. They continued to ask in 2011 when the Department of Transportation missed a congressional deadline for activating this mandate. Activists asked again early this year when the then-transportation secretary, Ray LaHood, requested still more time.

But they're not asking anymore — even after DOT announced Tuesday that it was finally adding backup cameras to the list of features recommended by its safety arm, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. On Wednesday, a coalition of safety groups, including Kids And Cars, Consumers Union, and parents whose children never reached puberty, filed a suit in New York that asks a federal appeals judge to force the DOT to speed up its act.

"Cars have been around for more than 100 years, and we still don't have good rear visibility," said Janette Fennel, who heads Kids And Cars, an accident-prevention group in the United States and Canada. "We're long overdue for a change."

The DOT has not commented on the suit, but its own estimates suggest that the delay past the statutory deadline has accounted for at least 237 preventable deaths — half of them young children — and at least 118 more fatalities expected, assuming the current 2015 deadline is met.

Although many automakers now include backup cameras in their more expensive models, the industry opposes the rules, partly based on cost and partly because of its preference for consumer choice rather than government mandates. "Let the marketplace decide," said a spokeswoman for the Auto Alliance, an industry lobbying group.

But Fennel noted that mandates — not choice — have led to many popular safety features such as seat belts, airbags, anti-lock brakes and crash-avoidance systems.

In issuing a proposed rule in 2010, DOT estimated that the overall cost of cameras would be at least \$1.9 billion — about \$58 to \$203 per vehicle. Currently, however, consumers often pay substantially more for this safety feature because the less-expensive vehicle models they seek aren't equipped with cameras.

"You don't get much of a choice if you have to buy an expensive package of options or a larger engine to get a camera," Fennel said. "Safety shouldn't be just for the rich — it should be for everybody."

For safety activists, especially parents who have accidentally killed their children, the current fight deepens an old wound that should have started healing back in 2007. That's when they thought they had successfully lobbied Congress for a law that — according to DOT estimates — should be saving at least 100 lives a year by now.

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