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Car Trunk Terror Spurs a Crusade for Changes

■ **Safety:** Locked inside a vehicle for an hour during a robbery, Janette Fennell has used her ordeal to help others. She is pushing for escape latches.

By RICHARD SIMON
TIMES STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON—Janette Fennell was locked in a car trunk for an hour by armed robbers.

That was her first ordeal.

The second was trying to get auto makers and the government to do something to prevent the same thing from happening to others.

For three years, the Bay Area mother



ROBERT DURELL / Los Angeles Times

Janette Fennell, with sons Noah, 6 months, center, and Alexander, 4, is pushing to make trunk escape

of two has fought an often lonely battle to make internal trunk escape latches as much a standard feature of cars as air bags and seat belts.

They are necessary, she argues, to provide a way out for children accidentally trapped in car trunks—11 suffocated during a three-week period last summer—and for crime victims.

A federal panel, to which Fennell was appointed, is expected in June to make its recommendations to the government on ways to reduce trunk entrapments. That could lead the government to require for car trunks what it mandated for refrigerators in the 1950s: Make them escapable.

"We are considering a recommendation that there be a permanent standard for trunk-release mechanisms in all new cars," said Heather Paul, executive director of the National Safe Kids Campaign and chairwoman of the panel.

Joan Claybrook, president of the consumer watchdog group Public Citizen and a former administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, also has urged the government to require a device that would allow the voice of even a very small child to be heard from inside the trunk.

"What I've learned is that one person can make a difference," Fennell said of her campaign to affect government change. Bill Chandler, an aide to Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), added: "She has shown exactly the kind of grass-roots leadership that can change public policy."

In fact, General Motors Corp. this week will begin offering \$50 trunk escape kits that can be installed in existing cars. And Fennell is expected to be on hand today when Ford Motor Co. announces that internal trunk releases will become a standard feature on its new cars. DaimlerChrysler Corp. also will be making trunk release kits available this summer, a company spokeswoman said.

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Never thought of people being locked in trunks as a serious problem? Neither did Fennell until it happened to her in 1995.

She and her husband, Greig, had just pulled into their garage when they were ordered at gunpoint into the trunk of their Lexus.

The most terrifying part was not knowing what was happening to their 8-month-old son, who was asleep in his car seat.

"The next thing we knew, we were traveling at a high rate of speed through San Francisco," Fennell said. "We had no idea where the baby was."

The robbers stopped the car and demanded that the Fennells turn over their ATM card and its personal identification number. "The last thing they said to us before they slammed the trunk was, 'If this isn't the right PIN number, we're going to come back and kill you.'"

After the gunmen could no longer be heard, the couple tugged and pulled at various wires and cables until they managed to get the trunk open.

"When we popped open the trunk, there was no car seat, no baby," Fennell recalled. They later found that their son had been left, still in his car seat, in an entry outside their home. Neither the Fennells nor their child was seriously injured. The robbers were never caught.

"If we had an inside trunk release, we could have popped it at a stoplight and run back to our home," Fennell said. "We were very blessed to have survived, but

many do not."

Trying to make sense of it all, the 45-year-old former sales manager began her crusade by founding Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition, or TRUNC. Working from a home computer, she established a Web site—<http://www.netkitchen.com/trunc>—to promote her cause, including offering do-it-yourself instructions on installing interior trunk releases.

She searched the Internet and also gathered police reports, news clippings and handwritten notes from people around the country. She has collected information on more than 1,000 victims, including more than 200 who had died. ("She probably has the largest collection of statistics of anybody, including the federal government," GM spokesman Bill Kemp said.)

She wrote to the car makers who, she says, initially saw no need for interior trunk releases, even though the son of a former top GM executive was kidnapped and locked in a car trunk in the 1970s. Industry officials told her that criminals might be more violent if they knew victims could escape from trunks.

She wrote to federal officials, who had considered the issue in 1984, in response to an inquiry from another victim, a Kansas City man who accidentally locked himself in a trunk. Officials at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration responded that the "likelihood of an internal trunk release lever ever being utilized is remote."

Fennell got a break in 1997, when she called a police chief in Marinette, Wis., to check on a report of a kidnap victim being

locked in a trunk. The chief contacted Rep. Bart Stupak (D-Mich.), a former state trooper, whose staff then contacted Fennell. Stupak sponsored legislation mandating a federal study of the problem.

Another turning point came last summer after 11 children, ages 2 to 6, suffocated in car trunks in Utah, Pennsylvania and New Mexico.

"Unfortunately, it took the death of 11 children to give this issue the attention it deserved," Fennell said.

The highway safety agency created a panel to study the issue, whose members, in addition to Fennell, include auto industry representatives and experts in such fields as child psychology, law enforcement and car safety.

"I think ultimately there will be a requirement of some kind," GM's Kemp said. He noted that there are now more ways for children to get into trunks, such as the fold-back rear seats found in many vehicles.

GM's new kit includes an escape handle that opens the trunk from inside and a modified outside latch that will help prevent the trunk from closing unless it is manually reset each time it has been opened. The kit also includes a strap that limits the distance the rear seat can go forward, preventing a child from being able to enter the trunk from the passenger compartment.

"I think it's wonderful," Fennell said, "except for the fact that it's \$50 . . . and very few people are going to go through the hassle to take their cars in and get [them] retrofitted because nobody thinks it's going to happen to them."