

Vehicles' blind spots contribute to child fatalities, group says

By Paul Hampel, Knight Ridder

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Transportation

ST. LOUIS At least 59 children have died in accidents related to vehicle blind spots in the last year, according to a group that tracks accidents involving children.

The nonprofit group Kids 'N Cars says the most common cause of such fatalities are the blind spots behind vehicles.

Janette Fennell, who heads Kids 'N Cars, said pickups have the longest blind spots of any popular vehicles—from 30 to 50 feet.

Her group has been lobbying legislators to force automakers to improve visibility. Radar systems or video systems are available that can detect objects in the path of vehicles backing up. While manufacturers offer such systems in higher-end vehicles, there are no federal requirements for such equipment.

"Do you realize that there aren't any visibility standards for the cars we drive?" Fennell asked. "The reverse warning systems help, but they're not enough."

A study published in 2001 by the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine concluded that most of the children severely injured in driveway-related incidents were struck by pickups or sport-utility vehicles backing up. Those vehicles, along with minivans, have accounted for almost half the new vehicles sold in recent years.

The study recommended that such vehicles have extended mirrors to reflect small children and pets, as well as other obstacles.

Fennell said rearview safety, or Frensel, lenses, are easily installed in the rear windows of longer vehicles and allow rear visibility down to the pavement. Such lenses typically cost about \$20.

Fennell cited a Consumer Reports study that calculated blind spots on popular vehicles. To measure the blind spots, a 28-inch traffic cone

was placed behind the vehicle at the point where the driver could just see its top. Visibility was especially restricted for drivers shorter than 5 feet 2 inches. For such drivers, sedans had blind spots ranging from 17 to 29 feet; minivans, from 23 to 35 feet; mid-size and large SUVs, 22 to 38 feet; and the one full-sized pickup checked was 51 feet.

For drivers 5 feet 8 inches, visibility improved about 40 percent in all vehicles but left a blind spot of 30 feet in a large pickup.

Fennell said that because federal agencies do not tally motor-vehicle accidents on private property such as parking lots and driveways, she believes that backover fatalities are more numerous than those her group has chronicled.

"The first challenge is to get the federal government to start collecting data," she said. "Then we need to test different technologies. And then we have to regulate the industry so that a certain amount of visibility is required behind the vehicles we drive."

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