

AUTO SAFETY

'Backover' accidents a hidden problem in Canada

PATRICK WHITE The Globe and Mail Published Sunday, Aug. 19 2012, 11:22 PM EDT

The scene held no forewarning of automotive tragedy: nearing noon, clear day, balmy temperatures, empty parking lot. A father seated behind the wheel of a 2002 Toyota Corolla dropped off his wife and eight-year-old son in the lot outside Toronto's Ontario Science Centre. As he pulled away, he realized they'd forgotten tickets in the car. He stopped and shifted the automobile from forward to reverse, an ordinary manoeuvre laden with myriad risks that the U.S. Department of Transportation has pledged to tackle in the coming years while its Canadian counterpart is silent on the issue.

For the father, it initiated a deadly sequence of events. According to Toronto Police, the reversing Corolla struck the mother and son. Both were sent to hospital. The eight-year-old died of his injuries. His mother is in serious but stable condition.

Awful as it seems, similar accidents – backovers as they're called in statistical compilations – kill 292 people in the United States every year, according to the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). If that figure seems oddly precise, it's because the department has recently devoted great financial and legislative energy to the issue, spurred on by pressure from the advocacy group KidsAndCars.org.

"It was an issue that had gone unaddressed because our government never took any data," says Janette Fennell, who founded the group to push for better protection of children in and around cars. "We are in these 3,000-pound lethal weapons and we can't see what's behind us, yet nothing was being done."

Based on wide-ranging data, Ms. Fennell estimates that 50 U.S. children are seriously injured by reversing vehicles every week. One in 25 of those dies.

And the problem appears to be getting worse. The number of children who died from backovers totalled 448 between 2006 and 2010, according to KidsAndCars, a five-fold increase from the previous decade. Newer car styles feature high trunk lines and small rear windows, reducing rear visibility. Both Consumer Reports and NHTSA have begun testing rear visibility and found that the rear of every modern vehicle constitutes a massive blind zone. For a 5-foot-8-inch driver with all mirrors properly adjusted, that zone extends anywhere from four feet for a Smart car to 50 feet for a Chevrolet Avalanche.

KidsAndCars offered a vivid illustration of the problem to Congress, showing that 62 children could huddle behind a large SUV without being visible in the driver's mirrors.

"Absolutely this is getting worse," said Ms. Fennell. "This is getting worse because our government has no rear visibility standard."

Not for long. The NHTSA announced earlier this year it would make backup cameras compulsory in all new vehicles by 2014. It has little choice in the matter. Intense pressure from KidsAndCars prompted the U.S. Congress to pass the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act in 2008. The law, named for a two-year-old boy struck and killed when his pediatrician father backed into his driveway, requires the NHTSA to create rear visibility standards.

Despite all the political action south of the border, the issue has remained relatively invisible in Canada. Transport Canada could not fulfill a request on Sunday for any information, stats or policy pertaining to backovers in this country. A 2006 Transport Canada research paper posted on the NHTSA website states 900 Canadians were struck and injured by reversing vehicles every year between 1992 and 2001.

The issue's obscurity is set to change. John McKiggan, a personal injury lawyer in Halifax, recently launched a Canadian branch of KidsAndCars. His biggest obstacle so far has been an absence of data.

"These accidents are happening up here just as frequently per capita as they are in the States but there are no real good statistics about it," Mr. McKiggan said. "Right now, I'm trying to pull together a database so I can go to Transport Canada and say 'Look, this is a problem you need to be tracking.'"

Mr. McKiggan points out that when the U.S. rule goes into effect, many of the American cars containing mandatory cameras will be manufactured in Canada. "So they're going to be built here, shipped across the border, yet here in Canada we won't be required to have the same safety features," he said. "It's shocking when you consider that thousands of children have been injured by backovers in Canada and yet no one is trying to correct it, no one's even aware of the problem."

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/backover-accidents-a-hidden-problem-in-canada/article4488985/>