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News Release

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The Safety Institute Announces Quarterly Vehicle Safety Watch List of Top 15 Potential Vehicle Defects: Jeep Transmission Issues Continue to Dominate

Today, The Safety Institute is releasing the latest report from its quarterly Vehicle Safety Watch List. For the third quarter in a row, as documented by death and injury claims found in Early Warning Reports, powertrain problems in 2014 and 2015 Jeep Cherokee vehicles occupy the top two spots. The other vehicle with staying power on the list for three quarters is the 2012 GMC Acadia, which occupies the 11th spot on the list for structural issues – likely related to rear lift gate failures that forced GM to recall some – but not all of the 2012 Acadia vehicles. And, according to manufacturers' claims filed in the first quarter of 2016 through the fourth quarter of 2016, three vehicles have now made the list for four quarters: the 2008 Buick Enclave, also for structural issues, the 2009 Chevrolet Cobalt for electrical problems and the 2009 Toyota Camry for speed control issues.

Using publicly available data such as the consumer complaints in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Vehicle Owners Questionnaire (VOQ) database, manufacturer-reported Early Warning Reports on deaths and injuries, and the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS), The Safety Institute Watch List identifies potential motor vehicle safety defects that merit additional engineering and statistical review

All but one of the vehicles that continue to show up on the list quarter after quarter have been the subject of NHTSA investigations. All have been recalled for defects that correspond the broad category of problem in the Watch List. For example, the Acadia and Buick Enclave's structural issues correspond to the June 2015 GM recall for lift gate gas struts that could wear out, causing the gate to suddenly fall, striking occupants' heads, necks and backs. Consumer complaints to NHTSA indicate that falling lift gates continue to be a problem – in part, because consumers report that GM has not made replacement parts available – or because their vehicle's build date put it outside the bounds of the recall. Complaints from a Buick Enclave owner like this one are common:

“The contact stated that the lift-gate failed to remain up and struck the contact in the back of the head. The contact received notification of NHTSA campaign number: 15V415000 (structure) and stated that the part needed for the repair was not available. The contact stated that the Manufacturer exceeded a reasonable amount of time for the recall repair.”

This issue has not been the subject of a NHTSA investigation. But the continued presence of the 2008 Enclave and the 2012 Arcadia on the list, coupled with the consistent complaints of parts unavailability and complaints that vehicles with the same problem were not included in the recall, indicate that it may be time for the agency’s Division of Recall Management to take a further look.

Remarkably, Toyota Camrys with speed control problems and Cobalt vehicles with electrical problems have made the Watch List nearly every quarter since it debuted in June 2014. In some quarters, these vehicles with these issues occupied multiple spots for various model years. In total, those Toyotas – nearly all Camrys – have made up about 15 percent of all 11 lists. Several General Motors vehicles that were investigated and recalled in 2014 due to an ignition switch defect, which could shut down the vehicle’s engine, cutting off the power steering and braking systems and disabling the airbags, have made up 31 percent of all 11 lists.

This quarter, 2009 Toyota Camrys with speed control problems is eighth on the list. It had been ranked 6th for the previous two quarters.. The 2009 Toyota Camry has been subject to two speed-control- related recalls: a 2009 campaign to correct unsecured or incompatible floor mats that could trap an accelerator pedal in an open position; and a 2010 recall for a problem with a malfunctioning friction lever that, in some circumstances, could cause the accelerator pedal to become harder to press, slow to return to idle or stick in a partially depressed position. According to VOQs to NHTSA, owners continued to complain about unintended acceleration incidents long after the recalls, citing incidents in parking scenarios, on the highway and at lower speeds; many resulted in crashes. The vast majority of the complaints are not related to those recalls. For example:

ODI 10626455: “While the vehicle was idling and the brake pedal depressed, the vehicle suddenly accelerated without warning. The contact applied more pressure to the brake pedal, but the vehicle failed to stop.”

ODI 10596111: “When entering my garage, the car automatically accelerated crashing through the back wall of the garage. I applied the brake but they didn't appear to work as the car was accelerating too fast. The car finally came a stop in the backyard against a fence post that was in concrete.”

ODI 10574364: “The contact stated that while driving approximately 15 mph, the engine rpm's suddenly increased as the vehicle started to accelerate without warning.”

ODI 10516217 “The contact stated that while stopped at a traffic light, the vehicle accelerated independently and crashed into two vehicles.”

ODI 10508582: “The contact stated that while driving approximately 35 mph, the vehicle accelerated on its own. The contact crashed into a tree.”

ODI 10497959: “My car went through the recall services, Toyota had for the acceleration problems through one of their dealers. However, on 02/08/2013, I was involved in an accident, wherein I felt this problem myself. On a busy road I may have been driving between 35-40 mph, when all of a sudden, when I applied brakes, my car wouldn't stop but accelerated to maybe double the speed and hit the car in front of me. It appeared as if there are no brakes in the car. The impact was so severe, that I am still nervous and shaken up with the incident. The person driving the car I hit, thought I was speeding. But it definitely was the acceleration problem.”

The Toyota Camry has been plagued with speed control problems since 2002, when Toyota installed its Electronic Throttle Control –Intelligent (ETC-i) system. The continued steady stream of unintended acceleration complaints, despite recalls and several NHTSA investigations into similar complaints involving earlier model years, suggests that neither Toyota nor NHTSA have pinpointed the root cause of unintended acceleration in Toyota vehicles, or the recall remedies were ineffective.

The 2014-2015 Jeep Grand Cherokee in the top two spots and the 2013 Chrysler 300 in the sixth spot and the 2012 Chrysler 300 in the 13th spot appear to correlate with the April 2016 Fiat Chrysler recall for vehicles equipped with a monostable gear selector. According to the Fiat’s recall submissions, the new gear selector “may not adequately warn the driver when driver's door is opened and the vehicle is not in PARK, allowing them to exit the vehicle while the vehicle is still in gear.” Fiat Chrysler blamed drivers for their mistaken belief that they had shifted the transmission into the Park position, but implemented a software update that would automatically shift the vehicle into Park upon the driver’s exit. Complaints to NHTSA indicate that parts availability has been a problem, long with excluding vehicles from the recall population that appear to be affected by the same problem.

The other perennial Watch List vehicles include the 2008 and 2009 Chevrolet Cobalt for electrical problems. The Vehicle Owner Questionnaires submitted to NHTSA suggest more widespread electrical issues, with owners complaining about stalling, steering, ignitions, power locks and deceleration failures. The preponderance of death and injury claims related to electrical problems in GM vehicles is an area that warrants further investigation by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Two new defect issues appear to be emerging: brake problems in the 2013 Dodge Dart and electrical issues in the Chevrolet Impala. Both models – in various model years – have made the list two consecutive quarters.

On June 18, 2015, both NHTSA and Fiat opened separate investigations into 2013 Dodge Dart vehicles regarding the potential for brake booster loss of assist, hard brake pedal, air leak noise and increased stopping distance. According to Fiat’s recall submissions, the automaker focused on the issues of engine oil migrating into the brake booster and tied it, through warranty claims to Dodge Darts with a 2.0L or 2.4L engine. In November 2015, Fiat recalled certain 2013-2014 MY Dodge Dart (“PF”) vehicles equipped with a 2.0L or 2.4L engine. The complaints to NHTSA suggest two problems with the recall: replacement parts were still not available long after the recall and some affected vehicles were not included in the recall.

The 2012, 2008, and 2007 Chevrolet Impala vehicles occupied the fifth, seventh and third positions respectively. The 2006-2014 Impala was among the vehicles swept up in the ignition defect recall. However, the most recent complaints to NHTSA indicate other electrical problems. Some driver complained about sudden stalls or severely-reduced-power-while-underway scenarios accompanied

by a "Service Traction Control" and "Engine Power Reduced" message display. GM has not recall any vehicles for this problem. However in April 2015, GM sent a notice its customers stating that "the 2009-2011 model year Chevrolet Impala vehicles may have a broken solder connection within the accelerator pedal position (APP) sensor. This condition may result in reduced engine power and loss of traction control assist. All other accessories and vehicle systems will function normally. While the condition is present, the driver information center will display "Engine Power is Reduced," and may also display "Service Traction Control" and "Service Stabilitrak." GM offered "Special Coverage" in the form of a free repair. The list indicates that vehicles outside of these model years may have the same problem.

The Quarterly Vehicle Safety Watch List, launched in 2014, is a product of the Institute's Vehicle Safety Watch List Analytics and the NHTSA Enforcement Monitoring Program. The Watch List is compiled using on peer-reviewed analytic methods, with support from Quality Control Systems Corp. These reports are intended to help the public recognize emerging problems in the U.S. fleet and to identify continuing failures potentially associated with known problems.

The Melton family sponsors the Vehicle Safety Watch List in memory of their daughter Brooke, who died in a 2010 crash caused by an ignition switch defect in her 2005 Chevy Cobalt. Brooke Melton, 29, died when she skidded into another vehicle after the ignition module of her 2005 Cobalt slipped into the accessory position. Documents and evidence developed in the Melton case found that GM knew about the ignition switch problem as early as 2001. Ken and Beth Melton, provide ongoing support to the significant research and analysis that the Watch List provides, in hopes of preventing future tragedies.

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The Safety Institute examines areas of injury prevention and product safety across a broad spectrum. The Institute bases its plans and priorities on issues that require greater study and emphasis, as well as those which may be underserved by other organizations and advocates. The Institute gives special attention to those areas of emerging importance