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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: Ford's Carbon Monoxide Woes Continue

Today, The Safety Institute is releasing the latest report from its quarterly Vehicle Safety Watch List. Jeep Grand Cherokee transmission problems, the 2016 Toyota Tundra with structure problems, carbon monoxide seeping into the occupant compartments of 1.3 million Ford Explorers, Honda Odyssey seats that fail to lock in place; and Nissan Altima hood latches that fly open while the vehicles are at highway speed are among the serious safety issues captured in our data analysis.

The 2015 and 2014 Jeep Grand Cherokee claimed the first and second spot, respectively. In April 2016, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) recalled 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. The most recent complaints suggest that Jeep Grand Cherokee vehicles are suffering from other transmission problems related to stalls at high speed and unintended acceleration.

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.

In third place is the 2016 Toyota Tundra with structure problems. This appears to correlate to a January Toyota recall for 72,847 light trucks in the 2016 and 2017 model years, to replace reinforcement brackets at the outboard corners of the rear step bumper that apparently can be easily damaged, causing the bumper to break off. Drivers have complained to the agency that the repair was not available months after the recall. Others reported that they sustained injuries when they stepped on the bumper and it broke off.

The 2013 Nissan Altima occupies the fourth place for a latch issue. Nissan has recalled the 2013 Altima three times trying to fix an issue in which the hood latch fails while the vehicle is underway. This October 2016 complaint from a driver in Liverpool New York is fairly typical: "While driving 70 mph, the hood latch released independently. As a result, the hood collided into the windshield. The contact sustained neck, head, shoulder, and back injuries that required medical attention."

The continuing problem of carbon monoxide seeping into the interior of the SUV, sickening occupants, earned the Ford Explorer four spots on the Safety Watch List: the 2015 model year in fifth place for an engine and engine cooling problem and the 7th spot for a fuel system issue; the 2016 Ford Explorer in the eighth position for the "other" category; and the 2014 Explorer in the ninth spot for engine and engine cooling. Despite the varied categories, the complaints indicate that the issue is the same. Here's a complaint from October 2017 by a police department in Corrigan, Texas:

"Ford Explorer police was stationary on us highway 59 north. The police officer in the driver seat lost consciousness for approximately one hour and 30 minutes. Another officer checked on the unconscious officer and found him to be not alert and unresponsive, therefore he summoned EMS and removed the unconscious officer from the explorer. EMS was able to gain consciousness of the officer but he was disoriented, unaware of where he was and who he was. Officer was placed on oxygen and transported to local emergency room where his arterial blood was taken. Arterial blood was found to have approximately 20% concentration of carbon monoxide. Arterial blood was taken approximately one hour after being removed from the Explorer and 40 minutes of being administered oxygen by EMS."

Last July, the agency bumped up a probe into this defect to an Engineering Analysis, with 2,842 complaints to Ford and NHTSA. The investigation now covers 2011-2017 Explorers. The issue has been the subject of news stories, as some of the victims were police departments, which use the Interceptor, a law enforcement version of the Explorer. Departments reported that at least five officers lost consciousness, were hospitalized for CO exposure or crashed their vehicles. The Engineering Analysis remains open.

After dropping off the Watch List for a quarter, Toyotas with speed control problems are back. This time, it is 2010 Toyota Prius vehicles in the 11th spot. The complaints drivers are making to NHTSA are similar to the ones owners of other Toyota models have been making since 2002 about unintended acceleration. For example, here's a complaint from a Minneapolis, Minn. Driver from November 2016:

In the past year, I have had 2 occurrences of unintended acceleration. The first in February of 2016. I was exiting a parking ramp up hill and stepping on the accelerator. I was driving straight then turning to the left (90 degree turn). When I took my foot off the accelerator, the car continued to accelerate and I was unable to get it slowed/stopped for about a block even though I was applying heavy brake pressure. The car was revving against the brake pressure.

No damage or injuries occurred. I took the car to the dealership where I purchased it (purchase date 8/3/13). They checked the car over and found no apparent cause for the acceleration. I took the car home, and it drove normally until 11/26/16. On that date I was driving very slowly in a flat parking lot, and the car began accelerating without my pushing the gas pedal. I was driving straight and then turning to the right (90 degree). I got the car stopped in a few feet by pressing extremely hard on the brake. My car did not hit anything.

The staying power of Toyota unintended acceleration complaints is remarkable, given that NHTSA and Toyota have exclusively tied this defect to floor mat interference and an accelerator pedal that is slow to return to its original position. The latter has launched recalls to address those issues, the former has conducted multiple investigations, but has claimed it was unable to find any other than mechanical causes or driver error. The 2010 Toyota Prius has never been recalled for Unintended Acceleration.

Also noteworthy on this quarter's list is a second-row seating defect in the 2016 Honda Odyssey, in the 12th spot and the 2015 model year in the 15th spot. These model years and others have been subject to two separate recalls involving the second row seat. In December 2016, Honda recalled 633,753 minivans in the 2011-2016 model years for outboard second row seats that failed to lock into place, allowing them to move freely. Honda identified the root cause as: "Due to surface roughness on internal parts, reduced torque on the return spring (as a result of manufacturing variability), inconsistent/inadequate grease application, and potential grease hardening under specific temperature and humidity ranges, there is potential for the seat to stay in the unlocked position (free-sliding) after returning the seat to its normal seating position." In December 2017, 806,936 vehicles in the same model years was recalled again, this time for second row outboard seats that could tip over. The defect notice stated: "The second row outboard (outer) seats can be placed in two positions, standard and wide. The rear outboard seat strikers have a collar to define the two set positions. If an outboard seat is positioned over the collar while attaching the seat to the vehicle floor, the seat will not latch properly to the seat striker."

The Melton family of Cobb County, Georgia 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