



The Safety Institute
340 Anawan Street
Rehoboth, MA 02769
www.thesafetyinstitute.org

News Release

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Contacts: Sean Kane, 508-951-1726

The Safety Institute Announces Quarterly Vehicle Safety Watch List of Top 15 Potential Vehicle Defects: CO in Fords and Honda's Sliding Seats Still Top-Ranked

Today, The Safety Institute is releasing the latest report from its Vehicle Safety Watch List, covering claims of deaths and injuries through the fourth quarter of 2018. The latest list shows the staying power of carbon monoxide fumes in Ford Explorers, sliding Honda Odyssey seats, and malfunctioning Sienna sliding doors. Other emerging problems may include Volkswagen Golf vehicles that lacerate occupants and crash avoidance technology that causes unintended braking.

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 our 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 pool of EWR claims considered for this analysis is restricted to incidents occurring in the same four quarter look-back period in which the claims are reported to NHTSA. This method lessens the dominance on the list of older, potential defects that are already well-known.

This quarter, visibility issues in 2018 Ford Explorers rose to the top of the list, but the most recent complaints to NHTSA don't provide much of a clue of what is driving death and injury EWR claims. There have been complaints in other Ford Explorer model years regarding rear/liftgate windows that spontaneously shatter. Increasingly, tempered glass explosions involving rear windows and sun roofs are showing up in the NHTSA Vehicle Owner's questionnaire and on owner's forums. The 2017 F-150, which occupies the last spot on the list under the category "other," seems to have an exploding rear window problem. To date, 14 such complaints have been filed to NHTSA. In mid-May, an owner in Louisa, Virginia complained: "Rear window of my truck popped and shattered a few min after activating the heat and rear defroster. Nothing has struck or compromised the window."

(Quality Control Systems Corp. has submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for records about any NHTSA inquiries/investigations involving the 14 Early Warning Reports for 2018 Ford Explorers

with alleged "visibility" defects as well as any potential Ford responses. QCS also submitted FOIA requests for any inquiries to Ford related to the "safe performance of the specific systems and components of 2018 Ford Explorers through which a driver views the surroundings of the vehicle.")

Carbon monoxide problems in late model Ford Explorers remain on the list for the ninth consecutive quarter, but now only occupying two spots. The 2017 model has dropped to second place, but the 2016 Explorer remains in sixth place for the second quarter; (Ironically the majority of VOQs for the 2018 Explorer describe exhaust odor problems as well.) Here is a recent complaint:

End of March 2019 after driving home from work on a Friday evening the car smelled like exhaust fumes (rotten eggs) when I parked the car in the garage. I called dealer and made an appointment to take the car in. Over the weekend both inside and outside the car the smell was terrible. Took car to ford dealer for repair. They suggested I needed a new battery (9 months old battery - was told battery causing smell). Picked up car and drove home. Once again upon parking car still smelled like exhaust. Car was returned to dealer. Dealer replaced PCV valve. Picked up car - drove home - car still smells like exhaust fumes. Car has gone into dealer 4 times for same problem. Can no longer park car inside of garage at home due to exhaust smell and potential safety issues.

There has been no action by Ford or NHTSA since July 2018, when the Center for Auto Safety demanded that Ford launch an immediate recall and the agency upgraded a probe to an Engineering Analysis, with 2,842 complaints to Ford and NHTSA. The investigation now covers 2011-2017 Explorers. There is still nothing in the public file to indicate what information has been provided, since the agency formally opened the investigation in July 2017.

The 2013 Toyota Avalon in the eighth spot and the 2014 Avalon is in the fourth spot – both for unknown problems. An examination of all complaints to NHTSA for these model years indicates that malfunctions of the vehicle's forward collision avoidance system are a perennial issue. These complaints are variously grouped under vehicle speed control, service brakes, unknown, electrical, adaptive equipment and forward collision.

The Toyota Tacoma, now in the third position on the list for exterior lighting issues, has no corresponding complaints, but in past model years, Tacoma owners complained that the headlight bulbs would overheat, melting the plastic cover.

Once again, there are few clues to the presence of the 2017 Audi A4 for electrical problems – even though this model is on the list for the fourth consecutive quarter, now in fifth place on the Watch List.

Second row seating problems in the Honda Odyssey are now on the Watch List for the seventh consecutive quarter, with the 2016 model year falling to sixth place. Honda has twice recalled the minivans, in December 2016 and December 2017. The most recent recall involved 806,936 2011-2016 minivans with second seating that failed to latch in place or could tip over. The most recent complaint was lodged with NHTSA in April by an owner who found out that his vehicle was not among those recalled.

The Volkswagen Golf in the 2015 and 2016 now occupy the 13th and ninth spot respectively for structure problems. Complaints to NHTSA indicate that the decorative trim pieces covering interior components peel away, exposing sharp metal pieces that have lacerated owners' fingers. This complaint from a Washington D.C. owner, lodged in March, is typical:

The front edge of the decorative metal trim around the gear selector sliced my finger open. This occurred on 3/12/2019 while reaching into the bin in front of the trim. The metal is extremely sharp and caused panic while driving as my finger bled.

The 2012 GMC Acadia is on the Watch List in tenth place for structure problems. Owners have been complaining about lift gates that suddenly come crashing down, striking them in the back and head. According to a February complaint from an Estill, Tennessee vehicle owner:

The lift gate opens and then immediately falls. It has hit me in the head a couple of times. The lift gate can only be held up if it is pushed up as high as it can go. I am short so that is hard for me to do. I also can't load/unload groceries if I'm holding the lift gate up. I let the lift gate close part way, holding it with my back as I try to load/unload groceries, but now the motor is pulling it closed on me and has trapped me up against the bumper! The car is always parked when we open/close the lift gate.

In the 11th position is the 2014 US Volkswagen Passat for a door latch issue. Vehicle owners complain to NHTSA that the driver's side door latch fails in temperatures below freezing, as well as rear door latch and trunk latch failures.

The 2017 Honda CRV was ranked 12th for problems with its forward collision features. According to NHTSA complaints, the forward collision avoidance system randomly activates, resulting in unintended braking – even at high speeds.

Toyota Sienna minivans with a power sliding door defect made the Safety Watch List for the fourth consecutive quarter, with the 2009 Sienna ranked 14th. In November 2016, Toyota recalled for 744, 437 2011-2016 Toyota Siennas that suddenly slide open while the vehicle is underway. In its Defect and Noncompliance Report, Toyota stated that “under certain limited conditions which impede the opening of the door, such as when the door becomes frozen with ice, the sliding door motor could stall when the door is operated. If the motor stalls, high current in the door motor circuit could be generated, operating the fuse for the door motor. If the fuse is operated with the sliding door latch mechanism in an unlatched position, the door could open while driving, increasing the risk of injury to a vehicle occupant.” No new complaints have been filed since 2018.

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