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Until recently, motor vehicle crashes were one of the leading causes of death and injury in the U.S. and they remain a major factor. Serious regulation of vehicle safety began a half century ago with passage of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act. At that time, there were nearly 26 road fatalities per hundred thousand population. In 2014 that number was down to just above 10. Had the earlier rate continued, 83,000 people would have died in vehicle crashes in 2014. Unfortunately, traffic deaths rose 7 percent to 35,072 in 2015, and 2016, preliminary data shows a 10.4 percent increase in traffic fatalities over 2015, a projected 38,700 deaths!

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration was given reasonably strong authority to set safety standards and require safety defect recalls. This was because the auto industry, concerned that states were passing conflicting safety standards, was willing to accept a stronger agency in order to give the Federal government authority to pre-empt state standards. Unfortunately, the agency has been kept small and underfunded, and its political leadership has often been reluctant or tardy in taking bold action for safety. The industry successfully fought against a provision for criminal penalties for violating the Safety Act that could have put their executives behind bars for selling vehicles they knew were unsafe. Drunk drivers that kill innocent motorists can be put in jail, but not auto executives.

Automakers have been assessed fines approaching or exceeding \$1 billion by the Department of Justice for violations of federal law, which may have a moderate deterrent effect on future behavior. However, civil

penalties available to NHTSA are capped at \$35 million per violation, which is nothing more than a slap on the wrist for companies making billions of dollars per year in profits. Even after setting the record for recalls in one year, and buying its way out of prosecution for \$900 million on the deadly ignition switch defect, GM placed the blame on a rogue engineer, retaining most of the upper-level staff whose actions contributed to the cover-up, and their profits are now as strong as ever.

Industry practices that result in compromised safety do not always result in stronger Federal standards. For years, weak roofs on rollover-prone vehicles saved the auto industry hundreds of millions of dollars every year while thousands of consumers died because those roofs collapsed in rollovers. Ironically, in 1970, NHTSA proposed a roof crush standard that would have had the same effect as the standard that was finally adopted nearly 40 years later and that could have saved many thousands of lives and prevented an even greater number of injuries. Along with two other rollover standards, one requiring electronic stability control (to reduce the likelihood of a rollover) and one that is substantially reducing ejection in rollovers, rollover fatalities in new vehicles are now down by roughly 75 percent. In numerous lawsuits, General Motors and Ford produced phony research and tests that supposedly showed no connection between roof crush and occupant injuries. They have yet to apologize to the American public for their deceptive position.

Collapsing seatbacks have been killing and injuring children in rear crashes for decades, during which time automakers have continually fought an upgrade to the federal seat strength standard.

While some European manufacturers have made adequately strong front seatbacks, showing that it is feasible, NHTSA has failed to respond positively to recent petitions from the Center for Auto Safety and others to strengthen the seatback standard.

Two recent defect cases demonstrate that automakers do not take NHTSA too seriously. Takata made defective air bag inflators that send shrapnel into the faces of crash victims, and conducted a campaign of misinformation for years, because they could underprice other suppliers by using a cheaper propellant that was not stable over time. For several years after their own engineers recognized a problem, GM installed ignition switches that would suddenly shut off engines, power steering and brakes, and air bags. Crashes of cars with these switches killed more than 200 people and injured many more, until the efforts of the Center for Auto Safety exposed this serious defect.

New cars are likely to continue to be produced with marginal safety performance and various defects. *The Car Book's* comprehensive crash protection safety ratings and listings of advanced, optional safety features can direct you toward safer new vehicles.

The Center for Auto Safety endorses a national goal of Zero Traffic Deaths by 2050. Your concern for vehicle safety, both in your choice of a vehicle and in your communications with NHTSA and Congress on safety issues, will help us achieve that goal. Your active support of CAS will support our work on your behalf toward safer, more reliable vehicles. In addition to using *The Car Book*, go to www.autosafety.org to learn more about auto safety and how you can support the Center.