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UA Not Just a Toyota Problem

Many makes and models blamed for unintended acceleration

The issue of unintended acceleration is reaching witch-hunt status as politicians and consumer advocates search for someone to blame for the deaths and injuries attributed to Toyota vehicles. Congress paraded Toyota executives past the cameras and NHTSA is under fire for not reacting aggressively when reports of Toyota's UA problems first began to trickle in years ago. The public's perception is that everyone involved is negligent, incompetent or both.

Maybe, but it is important to note that complaints of unintended acceleration are more common than you might think and have in the past involved many different makes and models. UA is not a new phenomenon and research has linked the problem to several disparate causes, not the least of which is driver error.

None of this is meant to diminish the harrowing experience and tragic consequences of unintended acceleration. But amid the media frenzy over Toyota's current recalls it is worth noting the fact that other vehicles have worse reported histories of UA, depending on how you analyze the data.

In an article in *The Truth About Cars*, writer Paul Niedermeyer points out that "numbers and statistics are largely useless without context." He says it is important to factor in the total number of vehicles produced before judging whether Toyota's hundreds of UA incidents constitute a monumental failure in engineering or something less spectacular.

As an example, at the time of his analysis, the 290 UA complaints involving Toyota's Camry from 2005 to 2010 represented just .124 vehicles per 1,000 vehicles sold. This compares to a rate of .413 per thousand for Lincoln's Town Car during the same five-year period, three times higher than Toyota.

In a different analysis, Edmunds.com points out that every one of the Big Six automakers — Chrysler, Ford, General Motors, Honda, Nissan and Toyota — have consumer complaints

of unintended acceleration filed with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Edmunds analyzed NHTSA’s databases for those complaints filed against the Big Six before September 30, 2009 and after that date. That’s because on September 29 Toyota announced a consumer safety advisory regarding potential floor mat interference with the accelerator pedal, triggering a flood of additional UA complaints.

The analysis, which looked at 2005 to 2010 models, showed that after the safety advisory was issued and received intense media attention, 601 unintended acceleration complaints were filed against Toyota Motor Corp. from October 1, 2009 to February 3, 2010. In the nearly five years prior to the advisory, Toyota had 532 such complaints. In total, Toyota's complaints exceeded the number filed against the rest of the Big Six automakers combined.

UA Complaints Per 100,000 Vehicles Sold MY 2005 - 2010*		
“Big Six” Vehicle Manufacturer	Number of UA Complaints	Complaints per 100,000 Vehicles Sold
Chrysler Group	156	1.72
Ford Motor Co	339	3.12
General Motors	134	0.81
Honda	89	1.26
Nissan	50	1.07
Toyota	532	4.81

* prior to September 30, 2009.
Source: NHTSA data compiled by Edmunds.com

While a flurry of new complaints were filed since the safety advisory was issued, Toyota still had the highest number of unintended acceleration complaints of any of the Big Six before September 30, 2009.

Toyota Motor Corporation's rate of complaints was the highest of the six at 4.81 per 100,000 vehicles sold. Ford Motor Company ranked just behind Toyota with 339 total complaints for a rate

of 3.12 complaints per 100,000 vehicles sold. General Motors had the lowest rate at 0.81 complaints per 100,000 vehicles sold.

It is important to note that when reporting UA complaints, NHTSA as well as the various vehicle manufacturers initially lump all reported incidents into one number, since they often do not know the problem’s cause or even whether the complaint is legitimate. Broken cables, electronic glitches, faulty assembly, pedal interference from floor-mats and other objects, all these instances carry the same weight when counting the total number of UA complaints.

This lumping of reported incidents makes for flashy but often misleading headlines of runaway vehicles. Upon examination, accident investigators often are unable to recreate the incident or they find a benign cause like a soda can inadvertently caught in the brake or gas pedal.

EDITOR’S COMMENT: *Toyota’s problems with UA show that complex vehicle engineering can trigger unforeseen consequences. Though Toyota is the media’s target du jour, the real story involves shining a brighter light on an industrywide problem involving many unrelated causes. It is likely the solutions to UA will be as diverse as its causes.*

NHTSA and other safety groups are pushing to equip new vehicles with an override device that would return the engine throttle to idle whenever the brake pedal is depressed. This is a sensible safety improvement that begs the question, what took so long? Such an override is already included in many European models, and Niedermeyer points out European models have extremely low UA rates.

No amount of engineering will eliminate every instance of unintended acceleration, which safety experts say can include stuck floormats, kids’ toys rolling under the pedals, all sorts of electrical and mechanical issues, and flustered drivers who mistakenly smash down on the wrong pedal during a driving emergency. ◇