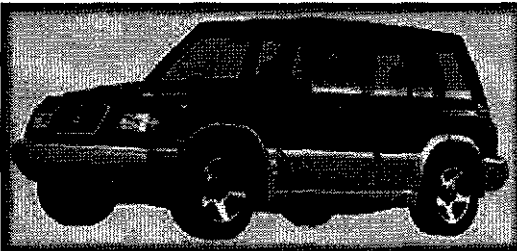


Not As Safe As You Think  
**SUV Death**

# Rates as High as Cars



The latest study says that sports utility vehicles, like this 1997 Suzuki Sidekick Sport, are not safer than cars because of their death rate in rollovers. (American Suzuki Motor Company)

**“We’ve got to start seeing the big picture or pretty soon we’ll all be driving — around in tanks.”**  
*R. David Pittle, a vice president at Consumers Union*

**REUTERS** ↗

**DETROIT, Dec. 12** — People riding in sport utility vehicles are just as likely to die in crashes as those in passenger cars because sport utilities roll over more often, according to a new study presented here this week.

Sport utility sales are increasing in popularity in part because the vehicles instill a greater sense of safety due to their larger size and higher driving position than passenger cars.

But the study by two industry safety consultants analyzed government crash data and found that sport utility vehicles are four times as likely to roll over in fatal crashes as cars. Higher death rates in rollovers offset lower death rates in other types of crashes.

## **Rollovers Make the Difference**

Consultants Athan Malliaris and Kenneth Digges, both former employees of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), presented the study Wednesday to a seminar on truck safety sponsored by the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Malliaris would not talk directly to reporters about the study Friday, but said through a society spokesman that the

study shows there is little difference between car and truck crashworthiness.

"If utility vehicles were not as prone to rollovers as they are, would they be safer than cars? The answer is yes," Malliaris said through the spokesman, David Schwartz.

## **High Center of Gravity**

The problem, he said, is the high center of gravity that sport utility vehicles have, which gives them better off-road ground clearance. The best way to reduce the number of rollovers in sport utility vehicles would be to design them lower to the ground—which would diminish their off-road capabilities.

NHTSA, the federal agency that sets automotive safety standards, said the study does not provide any new insights into the rollover propensity of sport utility vehicles, or SUVs.

"SUVs by definition are more likely to roll over," said NHTSA spokesman Tim Hurd. "The reason is that they're built for occasional off-road use."

Hurd said NHTSA has long required warning labels in sport utility vehicles urging drivers to use caution in sharp turns because the vehicles can roll over. He added that much research into making the vehicles safer is being conducted throughout the auto industry, but the agency is not considering any immediate changes to safety standards.

"The idea that you should just change the geometry of the vehicle has been rejected," he said. ■

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