

What Would Cars Be Like Without the Civil Justice System?

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Door Latches

Ford's own engineers identified the problem with its "paddle-style" handles, which allowed the doors to accidentally open in collisions. But rather than fix the design, Ford covered up the problem through red tape, until held accountable in court.

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Gas Tanks

Several car manufacturers, including GM and Ford, designed defective gas tank placement, which resulted in fires and explosions even in minor collisions. As a result of litigation, gas tanks are now universally located within rigid frames.

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Electronic Stability Control

The popularity of SUVs eventually brought to light the stability problems of certain models. Ford's Explorer, built on the already troubled Bronco II frame, experienced a rollover rate more than twice that of other SUVs. One result of litigation on SUV rollovers was an increased emphasis on the development of electronic stability control.

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Air Bags

Auto manufacturers have been developing air bag technology since the 1950s, yet were extremely slow in installing it. By 1988, only two percent of new cars came equipped with air bags. Courts found that manufacturers knew full well their cars were safer with air bags and that many lives could have been saved. Eventually, manufacturers were forced to install air bags in all cars.

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Illusory Park

Ford and Chrysler were two manufacturers that experienced systematic problems with transmissions that slipped out of park and allowed their "parked" cars to roll away. In one instance, a pregnant woman was killed after trying to save her four-year-old daughter in a parked minivan that rolled away. Ford eliminated the problem after being held responsible twice in court. Chrysler ignored the problem against its own engineers' recommendations, until finally litigation and regulatory investigations forced them to recall over a million affected vehicles.

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Tires

Tire manufacturers from Firestone to Goodyear tried to cover up problems with defective tires and have been held accountable in the courts. Firestone's defective tires caused 271 deaths, and the resulting litigation brought tires and their manufacturers under increased scrutiny.

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Side Impact Protection

When a police officer was left paralyzed by a low-speed, side-impact collision, a court held that the absence of side protection was a design defect. Now all cars are designed with rigid side-impact protection.

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Roof Crush

Vehicle manufacturers, particularly makers of SUVs, had long known roof strength was a critical weakness during rollovers. Without adequate regulatory standards, it was only litigation that forced manufacturers to begin strengthening roofs.

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Power Windows

As power windows became more common, so did deaths associated with them. Children were especially vulnerable through accidental depression of rocker-style window switches. The inexpensive solution, a lift-up style switch, was ignored by several manufacturers in order to cut costs, but litigation eventually forced universal acceptance of the safer switches.

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Seat Belts

Court cases went a long way in highlighting the dangers of inferior seat belts, or no seat belts at all. One example was Chrysler's defective Gen 3 seatbelt, installed in more than 14 million cars and proven to unlatch in accidents. Both seat belts and seats themselves were redesigned in response to litigation.

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Seats

Safety engineers call the prevalence of weakened seats the "most egregious, widespread defect to be found." Weak seats can collapse in even low-speed impacts and kill rear passengers. Without adequate regulatory standards, only court cases were able to highlight manufacturers' negligence and force them to install stronger seats in all cars instead of just certain models.

