

Perceptions of Sport-Utility Vehicle (SUV) Safety by SUV Drivers and Non-Drivers

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The number of sport-utility vehicles (SUVs) on U.S. roads has grown substantially in recent years. Despite the common perception of being safer than automobiles, SUVs are more likely to be involved in rollover accidents than other vehicles. Other negative aspects include increased headlight glare "blinding" passenger car drivers due to SUV's higher ground clearance, greater difficulty for other drivers seeing around SUVs because of their size, and poor gas mileage. Despite the negative publicity surrounding SUVs, the unfavorable aspects are apparently being downplayed to some degree because these vehicles have become a popular choice with consumers. It may be that SUV drivers tend to overlook the problems or they are willing to forgive the shortcomings of SUVs in light of other benefits (e.g., greater passenger and cargo space, style, etc.). The present study examined SUV drivers and non-drivers perception ratings of five SUV negatives: (a) seeing above or around them, (b) involvement in collisions with smaller vehicles with less mass, (c) headlights "blinding" the eyes of motorists in front of them in smaller vehicles, (d) rollover accidents, and (e) low gas mileage. Participants rated how much of a problem each was by using a 9-point Likert-type scale with the following verbal anchors tied to the even-numbered ratings: (0) "not a problem at all," (2) "somewhat a problem," (4) "a problem," (6) "very much a problem," and (8) "extremely a problem."

Surveyed were 370 individuals consisting of 246 undergraduate students ($M=21.2$ yrs, $SD=3.9$) and 124 non-students ($M=34.1$ yrs, $SD=14.3$) comprising 228 males and 142 females. Ninety-eight percent of the participants reported they had a valid driver's license.

In general, participants who had no SUV driving experience ($M=5.36$) gave stronger negative judgments to SUV issues than participants who drive an SUV or have had some SUV driving experience ($M=4.59$). Gas mileage was the most strongly rated negative aspect across all participants ($M=5.52$), and this aspect did not differ between drivers and non-drivers of SUVs. Also, beliefs about the potential for SUV rollover accidents ($M=4.68$) did not differ between drivers and non-drivers of SUVs. However, for the other three aspects significant differences were shown between drivers and non-drivers of SUVs. Specifically, non-drivers of SUVs reported significantly stronger negative judgments for (a) seeing above or around SUVs (non-drivers: $M=5.27$; drivers: $M=3.86$), (b) SUV involvement in collisions with smaller vehicles with less mass (non-drivers: $M=5.44$; drivers: $M=4.41$), and (c) SUV headlights "blinding" the eyes of motorists in front of them in smaller vehicles (non-drivers: $M=5.70$; drivers: $M=4.57$).

The differing perceptions between non-drivers and drivers of SUVs could be a result of several factors. For example, the non-SUV drivers might be responding based upon first- or second-hand knowledge of the negatives of driving an automobile on roadways with SUVs. The basis for the perceptions of SUV drivers might be due to (a) post hoc rationalization of their vehicle choice, (b) a belief that SUV hazards are outweighed by other aspects that make them better than passenger cars, or (c) a belief that SUV risks are remote and that negative outcomes only affect other drivers of SUVs—not them. These results have implications for improving our understanding of the processes involved in the formation of risk perceptions.