

Committee on Energy and Commerce
Opening Statement
of
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection and Commerce Chair Jan Schakowsky

Legislation to Make Cars in America Safer

July 24, 2019

Good morning, thank you all for attending today's hearing on legislation to make cars safer. The number of vehicle-related fatalities has been stagnant over the last several years. In both 2017 and 2018, vehicle-related deaths have exceeded 40,000.

This troubling development means that Congress must act. And today, we are here to look at bills to address contributing factors to this spike in auto-related deaths. One of these factors is impaired driving. I thank my colleague Debbie Dingell for her leadership on the issue, and I thank Ranking Member McMorris Rogers and Representatives Bucshon and McNerney for their initiatives to address impaired driving.

Another factor is uneven or slow deployment of technology. Since 1990, nearly 800 children have died from heat stroke in vehicles. In the vast majority of those cases, the adult did not realize the child was inside the car. Most of the children dying are infants and toddlers – 87% are 3 or younger. But adults, as well as pets, have fallen victim to heatstroke as well.

21 children have died already this year. TWENTY-ONE. This is unacceptable. We can do better, and we must do better.

This begs the question - How do we prevent heatstroke deaths?
It's not enough to educate parents about the risks. Even the best parent can get distracted.

We need safety features built into our vehicles. You get a warning when you leave your keys in the ignition. You should get a warning when a child is left in the backseat.

That's what the HOT CARS Act does. The bill, which I introduced with Reps. Tim Ryan and Peter King, would require new vehicles to be equipped with sensor technology to detect the presence of a child in a vehicle and notify the driver or parent.

This safety technology has already been developed, and it's available in some vehicles today. Our Hot Cars Act will ensure that this lifesaving technology is equipped on all vehicles. But our auto safety work does not end there.

The New York Times has identified at least 28 deaths and 45 injuries since 2006 attributable to CO poisoning caused by keyless ignitions vehicles that were inadvertently left running.

Since keyless ignition systems do not require drivers to turn off a vehicle to remove their key from the ignition, drivers can leave their vehicle—key fob in hand—not realizing the vehicle is still running. A vehicle left running in an attached garage can quickly fill the living spaces with lethal levels of carbon monoxide (CO).

The rise in keyless ignitions has also exacerbated the problem of automobile rollaways. Unlike traditional ignition systems, a keyless ignition system permits the driver to exit the vehicle—keys in hand—without the car being in park.

Fortunately, some auto manufacturers, including GM and Ford, have responded to these hazards by implementing additional safety features, including auto shut-off systems to prevent CO poisoning and safeguards that prevent a vehicle from shutting down unless the vehicle is in “park.” Still, few automakers seem willing to address the new risks posed to drivers, passengers, pedestrians, and property from keyless ignition technology.

That’s why I introduced the PARK IT Act with my colleagues Darren Soto, Joe Kennedy, and Seth Moulton.

I thank the witnesses for their testimony, and now recognize the Ranking Member for 5 minutes.