Coalition calls for action to curb lethal danger of pickups and large SUVs

[Media release and report embargoed until 8am, April 18, 2024]

TORONTO (April 18, 2024): An Ontario-wide coalition of road safety and community groups (C.R.A.S.H.) today released its report --- "Oversized Danger" --- about the lethal danger of pickups and large SUVs. The coalition's recommendations call for action from all three levels of government to protect pedestrians, persons with disabilities, and cyclists.

"The U.S. experience offers a cautionary tale about the consequences of an unchecked increase in pickups and large SUVs," said lawyer Sonam Sapra on behalf of Bike Law Canada. "Pedestrian deaths in the U.S. have surged over the past decade. If we want to avoid the same tragic outcome in Canada, there is no time to lose."

In the U.S. the rise in pedestrian and cyclist fatalities since 2009 has coincided with the proliferation of pickups and large SUVs. (Between 2010 and 2019, pedestrian fatalities increased by 50%, even as deaths of motorists remained largely unchanged.) In Ontario, a 2020 pedestrian fatality causation study by the Ministry of Transportation reported that a pedestrian hit by a light truck is 3.4 times more likely to die than if hit by a conventional car. In contrast to the U.S., the number of pedestrian deaths in Ontario has remained fairly steady albeit increasing to 22% as a proportion of total road deaths. At the same time, sales of larger passenger vehicles in Canada, especially pickups, are soaring.

Recent research points to the higher front-end of pickups and large SUVs as a key predictor of pedestrian fatality in crashes, distinguishing between vehicle front-end heights that measure more than 1.25 metres (70% of pickups and large SUVs) or less than 1.25 metres (almost all cars). Canada's most popular selling vehicle, the Ford F-150 pickup has a front-end height of almost 1.4 metres (from the ground to the hood), compared to less than 1.0 metres for the Toyota Corolla. The consequence of the higher front-end is that a victim's upper body (head and thorax) is more likely to absorb the impact, instead of the legs of a victim who is then thrown onto the hood. (A pedestrian hit by a pickup or large SUV, may also be thrown backward, then run over by the vehicle.) Given their shorter height, women and children on foot are as much as eight times more likely to be killed in crashes with pickups and large SUVs.

Researchers have likewise identified the greater weight, and therefore the greater kinetic force, of pickups and large SUVs in making them more deadly in crashes with pedestrians and cyclists.

"Other jurisdictions are beginning to act to curtail the use of pickups and large SUVs, motivated by a range of factors including greater road danger, excess demand on urban space for parking, and higher tailpipe emissions that contribute to climate change," said law Professor Christopher Waters, representing Bike Windsor Essex, a coalition member. "But while others respond, in Ontario --- and Canada more generally --- we've been sleepwalking into a vehicle 'arm's race' in which we all lose."

The coalition's recommendations include calls for the federal government to change vehicle design specifications, require safety warnings in vehicle ads, and to include the safety of pedestrians and cyclists in its vehicle safety assessments. Provinces are urged to require more stringent driver's licence requirements for operators of pickups and large SUVs and the (re)introduction, on a sliding scale, of licence renewal fees based on a vehicle's danger to pedestrians and cyclists. Cities are called upon to increase parking fees related to vehicle size and to review their vehicle purchasing policies.

"The research makes clear that pedestrians and cyclists are more likely to be hit by a pickup or large SUV, and if hit, then more likely to die," said Albert Koehl, environmental lawyer and coordinator of Community Bikeways. "We are counting on each level of government to step forward, acknowledge the problem, and to take decisive, timely action in the public interest."

At a symposium at the University of Toronto on Thursday, April 18, from 12noon to 3pm, hosted by the University of Windsor's Centre for Cities and the University of Toronto's Mobility Network, the coalition will present its report and recommendations. (Rm 2214, OISE, 252 Bloor Street West). **A media event at 10am** on the same day will take place immediately adjacent to the east side of OISE.

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The Coalition to Reduce Auto Size Hazards (C.R.A.S.H.) includes 16 groups from around Ontario: Advocacy for Respect for Cyclists (ARC), Bike Law Canada, Bike Windsor Essex, Bridging Overlea (Toronto), Citizens Environment Alliance (Windsor), Community Bikeways (TCBC), Cycle Toronto, CycleWR (Waterloo), Environment Hamilton, Friends and Families for Safe Streets (FFSS), Going the Extra Mile for Safety (GEMS), Guelph Coalition for Active Transportation (GCAT), London Cycle Link, Safe Parkside, TTC Riders, and Walk Toronto.

Backgrounder

In Ontario, as in the rest of Canada, light trucks have come to dominate new vehicle sales. Between 2010 and 2022 in Ontario, the sale of "trucks" (primarily SUVs and pickups) increased from 325,000 to 520,000 vehicles while car sales dropped from 260,000 to 135,000. In 2023, Ontario recorded its highest-ever sales for light trucks, reaching 83% of all new vehicle sales. In particular, the sale of pickup trucks has risen dramatically.

Although individuals in large vehicles are safer in crashes, a 2004 study by White, "The Arms Race on American Roads: The Effect of SUVs and Pickup Trucks on Traffic Safety," using U.S. crash data for 1995-2001, found that larger vehicles were creating more dangerous road conditions in aggregate. The study estimated that for every life saved by an individual switching from a car to a light truck, 4.3 fatalities occurred among other drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists.

Professor Justin Tyndall, "Pedestrian Deaths and Large Vehicles," in a 2021 study found that for the period 2000-2019 in the U.S., an estimated "8,131 pedestrian lives would have been saved if all light trucks had been cars. The reduction would be equal to avoiding 9.5% of all pedestrian deaths."

In a more recent (2024) study, "The Effect of Front-end Vehicle Height on Pedestrian Death Risk," Tyndall found that a 10 cm increase in vehicle height is associated with an estimated 22% increase in fatality risk for a pedestrian that is struck. He reported that if all vehicles in the U.S. had a front-end height of 1.25 metres or less, over 500 pedestrian lives would be saved; and if all vehicle front-ends were capped at 1 metre, the number of lives saved would rise to 1,350.

Hood height of passenger trucks increased by 11% since 2000, while weight increased by 24% in the same period in the U.S., according to Consumer Reports.

Edwards and Leonard in a 2022 study, "Effects of Large Vehicles on Pedestrian and Pedal-cyclist Injury Severity" found that a child (under age 18) struck by an SUV was eight times more likely to be killed than a child hit by a passenger car, while a senior (aged 65 and over) struck by a pickup truck was nearly three times more likely to be killed compared to a senior struck by a passenger car. The study also reported that a pedestrian or (pedal) cyclist struck by a pickup truck was 4.7 times more likely to die as a result of the crash.

The (U.S.) Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) reported in March 2022 that certain types of crashes with pedestrians, including ones where the vehicle was making a turn, are more likely to occur with SUVs, pickups, vans, and minivans. The higher height of pickups and SUVs as well as roof support pillars,are suspected of creating more driver blind spots. "At intersections," according to the IIHS, "the odds that a crash that killed a crossing pedestrian involved a left turn by the vehicle versus no turn were about twice as high for SUVs, nearly 3 times as high for vans and minivans and nearly 4 times as high for pickups as they were for cars."