

Toyota's acceleration problem: Thousands of bad drivers?

Federal investigators and Toyota engineers say "virtually all" the recent Toyota crashes were caused by driver error. Is the Japanese carmaker off the hook?

POSTED ON JULY 14, 2010, AT 10:45 AM



New evidence suggests the brakes weren't engaged at the time of the Prius crashes. *Photo: Getty* **SEE ALL 7 PHOTOS**

Toyota and its stock have been hammered over the past year by reports that thousands of Toyota and Lexus models had crashed due to a combination of sudden, automatic acceleration and unresponsive brakes. But it turns out, according to preliminary testing by the federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the crashes were probably due to thousands of cases of human error. Is Toyota just the victim of bad drivers and predatory lawyers, or is there more going on here? (Watch a local report about the finding)

What did the NHTSA find?

The federal safety agency looked at the "black boxes" in dozens of totaled Toyotas and Lexuses whose drivers blamed their crash on unresponsive brakes

and runaway acceleration, and found that in nearly all cases the accelerator was at full throttle and the brakes weren't engaged at the time of the crash, *The Wall Street Journal* reports. That suggests the drivers mistakenly stepped on the gas when they meant to hit the brakes.

Would so many people really make the same error?

It wouldn't be the first time. In 1989, the NHTSA looked into similar sudden-acceleration claims involving the Audi 5000, and similarly concluded that most of the incidents were the result of driver mistakes, not faulty accelerators.

Has Toyota done its own testing?

Yes, Toyota engineers have looked at about 2,000 wrecked cars, and they've come to the same conclusion: "Virtually all" crashes were due to drivers hitting the gas instead of the brakes. Notably, they have found no evidence of a defect in the electronic throttle-control system, a focus of many of the 325 U.S. lawsuits against Toyota related to unintended acceleration.

Why didn't they just say so earlier?

Driver error has been the working theory at Toyota since this rash of claims hit the news media late last summer, as its engineers couldn't find any other cause for many of the crashes. But as Toyota President Akio Toyoda says, blaming customers isn't part of the company's PR strategy.

Does this let Toyota off the hook?

Not quite. Some Toyota cars really do have "sticky" accelerator pedals and floor mats that can trap the accelerator to the floor — that's why Toyota has recalled 8 million vehicles worldwide in the past year and was hit with a \$16.4 million NHTSA fine. And the defective floor mat caused at least one of the 75 fatal Toyota crashes reported to the NHTSA, killing a California patrolman and his family last August.

Is everyone buying the driver-error explanation?

Of course not. Blaming 3,000 drivers is "totally ludicrous," says former NHTSA chief Joan Claybrook at consumer advocate Public Citizen. "They should be looking at the electronics in their cars and everyone knows it." And Little Rock, AR, attorney Tab Turner, who represents four plaintiffs suing the automaker, says that the instruments Toyota and the NHTSA use to read the "black box" recorders are "not reliable." Oh please, says the Cato Institute's Walter Olson. "Maybe it's rude to say 'I told you so,'" but I and others who pointed to driver error have clearly been vindicated. We, and Toyota, deserve a "stream of apologetic stories" from the gullible media.

Sources: *Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg, *Mother Jones*, Cato Institute, Daily Finance