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Winner of Nine Pulitzer Prizes

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Car Briefs

Old Volvo 240 Safest, Says Insurance Group

Seattle Times News Services

Which is the safest car on the road? An insurance industry group said it's the Volvo 240.

But it's not built anymore.

The most dangerous, says the group: the Chevrolet Corvette, based on the number of drivers who get killed in them.

A lot has to do with who drives each car - and when, and how - not just how crashworthy they are, says the group.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety based its findings on a study of four years' worth of accidents in which drivers were killed. The crashes occurred between 1989 and 1993 and involved 1988 through 1992 vehicles.

The group said no drivers of '88 through '92 Volvo 240s were killed during those years, so its death rate was the lowest.

Production of the aged Volvo 240 was discontinued after the 1993 model year.

The institute said 327 drivers died in Corvettes, giving the sports car a fatality rate more than three times the average, which is 100.

In general, the group said, the safest vehicles are large ones equipped with driver-side air bags.

But death rates are affected by how and when a vehicle is driven. A minivan, for example, is less likely than a sporty car or small pickup to have a teen-ager at the wheel or be driven late on a Saturday night.

Still, said Kim Hazelbaker, a senior vice president of the institute, the study found wide variations in death rates for vehicles of the same type - proof, he said, that some vehicles protect their drivers better than others. "Some of it," he said, "clearly is vehicle engineering."

Gregory Pierce, a General Motors spokesman for safety issues, said he had not seen the report but he questioned whether such a conclusion about GM's Corvette could be drawn from 27 accidents. And, he contended, 90 percent of accidents are caused by driver error. "That's a telling statistic," he said.

HONDA CIVIC EMERGES AS TOP GASOLINE MISER

After five years of dominating the fuel-economy derby, the Geo Metro is taking a back seat in 1995 - to be replaced by a Honda.

The Honda Civic hatchback emerged as the stingiest gasoline miser on the road, rated at 56 miles per gallon on the highway and 47 mpg in city driving, the best among 1995 model cars tested, says the Environmental Protection Agency. Honda subcompacts accounted for half of the 10 most fuel-efficient vehicles.

Two Geo Metro models of subcompacts still made the top-10 list, but missing was the discontinued Geo Metro XFi, which had been No. 1 for five straight years. Last year, Geo Metro cars finished first, second and third.

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