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## Cause of Sudden Acceleration Proves Hard to Pinpoint

By [KATE LINEBAUGH](#) and [DIONNE SEARCEY](#)

Congress this week has begun wading into an issue that has vexed the auto industry for decades: Is sudden acceleration caused by driver mistakes, or by problems with cars?

The consensus among industry executives and federal safety regulators, embodied in a 1989 report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is that most cases of sudden acceleration result from drivers hitting the gas pedal when they meant to hit the brakes.

But this week, witnesses at a hearing of the House Energy and Commerce Committee have said that 21-year-old report is outdated in an age when many vehicles are controlled by electronic throttle and braking systems that didn't exist in substantial numbers back then.

Toyota Motor Co. President Akio Toyoda told a Congressional committee Wednesday he was "absolutely confident" there was no design flaw in the company's electronic throttle-control system.

When asked by a lawmaker whether Toyota would continue to blame drivers for sudden accelerations problems, Mr. Toyoda said: "I will make sure that we will never ever blame the customers going forward."

Toyota's U.S. sales chief, Jim Lentz, told lawmakers Tuesday, "I don't think any manufacturer knows 100% what is causing" sudden acceleration. He said the company is confident "from what we know today" that electronics aren't a problem, but that Toyota's recent safety recalls may not totally solve sudden unintended acceleration in its cars.

Driver error is the auto industry's bugaboo. Even when dealers and auto makers suspect driver error, it is difficult for them to outright blame their customers for fear of alienating them or appearing insensitive, as sometimes serious injuries or fatalities are involved. In Toyota's case, some of the most high-profile incidents of sudden acceleration involve drivers who are elderly or with health issues that may never be definitively ruled out as contributing factors.

Mr. Lentz acknowledged after a hearing Tuesday that both auto parts and human error could be to blame. "I think in the case of sudden acceleration there are mechanical issues, there are human interface issues. There is pedal misapplication. It exists."

Toyota is getting a lot of attention for sudden unintended acceleration, but [Ford Motor Co.](#) has been the subject of more complaints with federal regulators in the recent past. From 2004 to 2009, based on NHTSA data, Ford had 2,806 complaints, compared with Toyota's 2,515. General Motors Co. had 1,192. A study by [Edmunds.com](#), an independent market-research Web site, found that based on the number of vehicles on the road, Toyota ranked 17th in recalls, with

Land Rover, recently acquired by India's Tata Motors Ltd., having the most..

Ford spokesman Said Deep said, "When you analyze NHTSA data and remove the complaints due to the speed control deactivation switch, which we recalled in 2005, Ford's performance in this category has improved each year and our complaints have been significantly lower than Toyota's each year since 2005." Still, Mr. Deep said Ford's speed deactivation switch—which shuts off the cruise control when the driver hits the brakes firmly—had no connection to sudden acceleration, and that about 14 million vehicles were recalled due to the potential of the switch causing fires while vehicles were parked.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Tuesday he would expand a probe into sudden acceleration to other auto makers.

The NHTSA's official view, detailed in a 454-page 1989 report, is that the vast majority of sudden acceleration incidents in which no vehicle malfunction is present are caused by drivers mistaking the gas pedal for the brake. However the NHTSA continues to investigate all potential causes for sudden acceleration, including the electronic throttle control system in Toyota vehicles.

In the 1980s, a consumer scare over mechanical defects in Volkswagen AG's Audi 5000 vehicles caused Audi sales to collapse, but the NHTSA later determined the cause of the problem was "pedal misapplication," meaning a driver was mistakenly hitting the gas instead of the brake. It took years for Audi's sales to recover and a mechanical defect was never found in the vehicles.

Consumer-safety advocates and plaintiff attorneys are concerned that Toyota and the NHTSA are fixated on mechanical explanations and haven't adequately looked into the vehicles' electronics.

Safety regulators, human-error experts and auto makers say driver error is the primary cause of sudden accelerations, and if there are no error codes in the electronics, there is no evidence to support an electronic failure.

"Many, if not all, are pedal errors," said Richard Schmidt, a leading expert on human error, said of Toyota's sudden-acceleration complaints. "There are all of these hypotheses flying around—the computer went haywire and it was left without a trace of evidence. What's the evidence?"

In cases where there is no evidence of mechanical failure, NHTSA investigators continue to rely on the 1989 report that concluded driver error was the most likely explanation.

Rhonda Smith, who testified before the House committee Tuesday, said her Lexus began accelerating on its own after her cruise-control light turned on by itself. She flipped the off switch for her cruise control but the car continued speeding up, and that is why she surmises the electronics may have played a role.

Toyota told Ms. Smith in a letter that the auto maker's inspectors were "unable to duplicate the unintended acceleration you reported."

A final report from NHTSA, dated May 2, 2007, noted an NHTSA investigator, Scott Yon, didn't check the electronics. His report listed the cause as the pedal sticking to an all-weather floor mat, which was stacked atop a carpeted floor mat.

"When I got that I was pretty furious," said Ms. Smith. "I called him and I said, 'Scott, it wasn't my floor mats,' and I said it was the electronics. He said there's an ongoing investigation on that."

NHTSA says it followed up with the current owners of Ms. Smith's Lexus and was told that they have had no problems since they bought it with less than 3,000 miles on the car. It now has about 30,000 miles on it.

—Jeff Bennett contributed to this article.

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## Shifting Gears | Toyota has the largest number of sudden acceleration complaints now, but that hasn't always been the case.



