The Guardian

'A deadly problem': should we ban SUVs from our cities?

Statistically less safe than regular cars and with higher CO2 emissions, campaigners argue the heavily-marketed cars have no place in urban areas

Some campaign groups believe regulators should force car manufacturers to produce and sell zero-emission and suitably sized vehicles. Photograph: RichardBaker/Alamy

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"SUV insanity" shouted the front page of German business newspaper Handelsblatt earlier this month, showcasing a weekend special questioning the aggressive marketing by carmakers of highly profitable 4x4 vehicles.

That evening, at a busy Berlin intersection, the driver of a Porsche Macan SUV lost control of his vehicle and mounted the pavement, killing four people: a three-year-old boy and his 64-year-old grandmother, and two men in their 20s.

The city erupted. "It was no longer a theoretical danger; people were being killed," says

Benjamin Stephan, a transport and climate change campaigner at Greenpeace. "There was a public outcry. It didn't come from nowhere, people are upset about these cars."

'SUV madness': business newspaper Handelsblatt's edition questioning the marketing tactics of car manufacturers. Photograph: © Handelsblatt Media Group

The following day hundreds of Berliners gathered at a vigil for those killed, calling for a ban on SUVs. Stephan von Dassel, the district mayor of Berlin-Mitte, said "armour-like SUVs" don't belong in cities. Oliver Krischer, a deputy leader of the Green party in the German parliament, called for size restrictions on 4x4s allowed into urban centres. "The best solution would be a nationwide rule that allowed local authorities to set size limits," he told Der Tagesspiegel.

SUVs are a paradox: while many people buy them to feel safer, they are statistically less safe than regular cars, both for those inside and those outside the vehicle. A person is 11% more likely to die in a crash inside an SUV than a regular saloon. Studies show they lull drivers into a false sense of security, encouraging them to take greater risks. Their height makes them twice as likely to roll in crashes and twice as likely to kill pedestrians by inflicting greater upper body and head injuries, as opposed to lower limb injuries people have a greater chance of surviving. Originally modelled from trucks, they are often exempt from the kinds of safety standards applied to passenger vehicles, including bonnet height. In Europe legislation is being brought in to end such "outdated and unjustified" exemptions.

In Germany the Berlin crash was only the start of protests. After the fatal collision, Greenpeace blocked a shipment of SUVs in Bremerhaven for several hours.

In Frankfurt the following weekend between 15,000 and 25,000 people gathered in a protest months in the planning, at the launch of the biannual Frankfurt Motor Show, where German auto manufacturers promoted their SUVs alongside smaller and cleaner electric vehicles. As Chancellor Angela Merkel toured the stands activists climbed atop SUVs holding banners that read "*Klimakiller*" (climate killers).

Activists, including one wearing a Angela Merkel mask, outside
the Frankfurt Motor Show, holding signs reading 'gas guzzling
vehicles off the road' and 'Stop petrol and diesel'. Photograph:
Yann Schreiber/AFP/Getty Images

"In Germany in 2018 they spent more on marketing SUVs than on any other segment; they actually spent as much as they spent on other segments together" says Von Dassel. "This is not some accident that people suddenly are really into these cars, they are heavily pushed into the market."

In Europe, sales of SUVs leaped from 7% of the market in 2009 to 36% in 2018. They are forecast to reach nearly 40% by 2021. While pedestrian deaths are falling across Europe, they are not falling as fast as deaths of those using other modes of transport.

Although EU-wide figures don't break down the type of car involved in collisions, in the US the link is clearer. "Pedestrian crashes have become both deadlier and more frequent," says the US Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). "The increase has been mostly in urban or suburban areas, away from intersections, on busy main roads and in the dark. Crashes are increasingly likely to involve SUVs and high-horsepower vehicles."

Last year was the deadliest for US pedestrians since 1990, with 6,000 deaths nationwide. The growth in SUV sales, which account for 63% of passenger vehicle sales, is partly to blame. Pedestrian crashes involving SUVs increased 81% between 2009 and 2016, according to the IIHS. A report by the Governors Highway Safety Association found that while pedestrian deaths in collisions with cars increased 30% from 2013 to 2017, those involving SUVs increased by 50%.

People mourn at the site of an accident in Berlin, in which four people were killed and three seriously injured when a SUV car crashed into a group of pedestrians. Photograph: Felipe Trueba/EPA

In New York City, two children were killed by SUV drivers mounting the sidewalk in the first two weeks of September. "Are we safe anywhere?" asked sustainable transport news site Streetsblog.

While the UK government doesn't record passenger vehicle type in collision injuries and deaths, British academics who analysed police collision data have identified pedestrians as 70% more likely to be killed if they were hit by someone driving a 2.4-litre engine vehicle than a 1.6-litre model.

"You're saying if you're hit by a large engine car you're almost twice as likely to be killed," says Adam Reynolds, one of the researchers.

Reynolds and Robin Lovelace, who jointly performed the analysis, are still looking into the figures. "Rather than making a declaration that SUVs are dangerous what we can say is large engine cars are dangerous," he adds. The lack of collision data is "masking a deadly problem created by the car industry marketing and producing taller, heavier vehicles", he told Forbes.

'Climate killers'

Transport, primarily road transport, is responsible for 27% of Europe's carbon emissions. A decade ago the EU passed a law with a target to reduce carbon emissions to 95g/km by 2021 but a recent report by campaign organisation Transport and Environment highlights what is calls it "pitiful progress". "Sixteen months from before the target comes into force carmakers are less than halfway towards their goals," the report adds . The car industry faces hefty fines in Europe of €34bn in a few months for failing to meet emissions targets.

The industry blames the market turning away from diesel, which is lower carbon than petrol, although more toxic. The Transport and Environment report places the blame firmly on the rise of SUVs, "driven by carmakers' aggressive marketing".

Greenpeace protesters outside the Frankfurt Motor Show.
Photograph: Felipe Trueba/EPA

Their larger engines and bulk mean on average SUVs have CO_2 emissions 14% (16g/km) higher than an equivalent hatchback model. Every 1% market shift toward SUVs increases CO_2 emissions by 0.15g CO_2/km on average. A 2018 Committee on Climate Change report noted that "the popularity of SUVs is cancelling out emissions savings from improvements in technology".

Julia Poliscanova, director of clean vehicles and e-mobility at Transport and Environment, says regulators must step in to force car manufacturers to produce and sell zero-emission and suitably sized vehicles, for example small and light cars in urban areas.

"Smart urban policies are also key to drive consumers towards clean and safe modes," she adds. "Mayors should reduce space and parking spots for private cars and reallocate it to people and shared clean mobility services."

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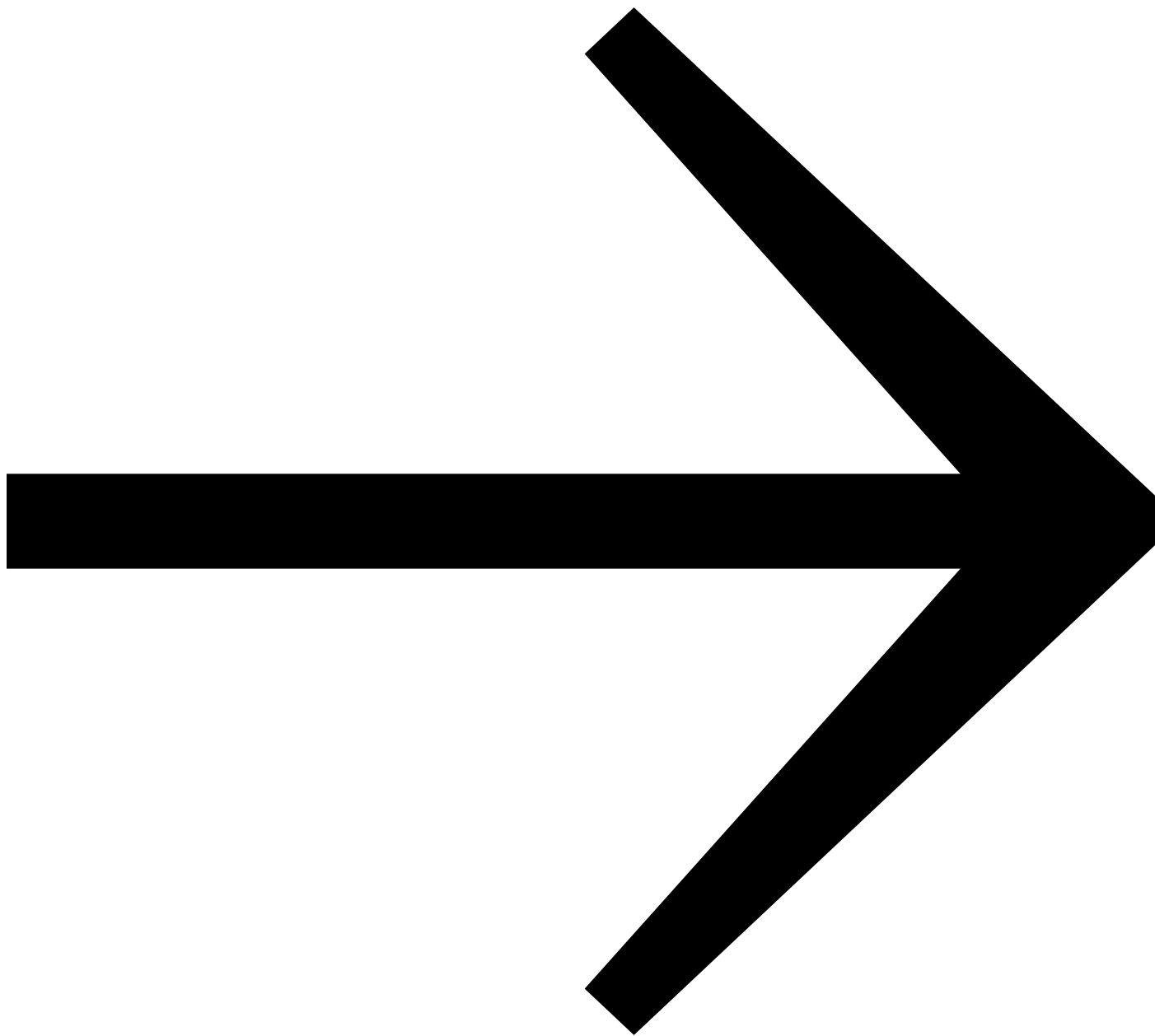
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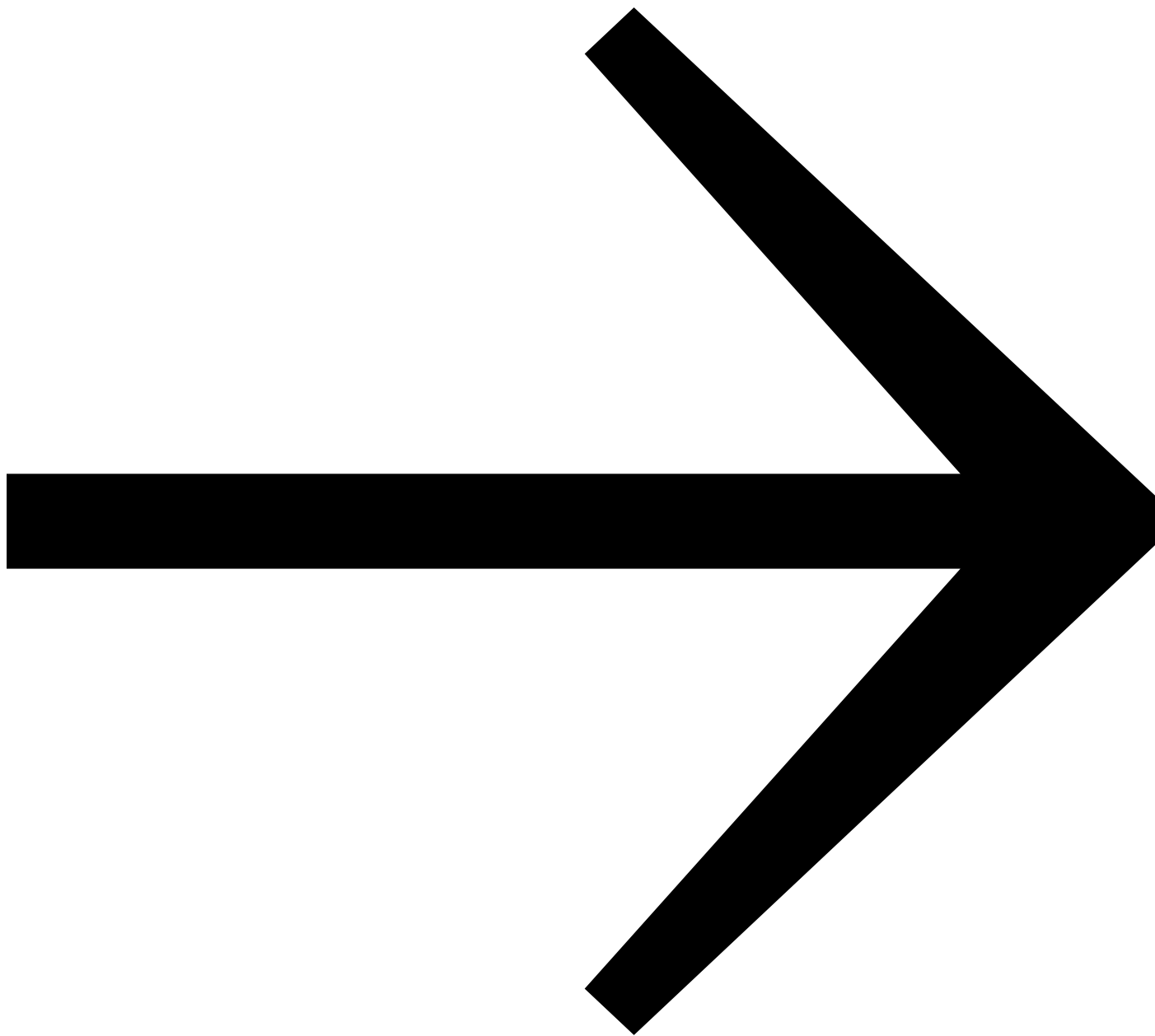
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