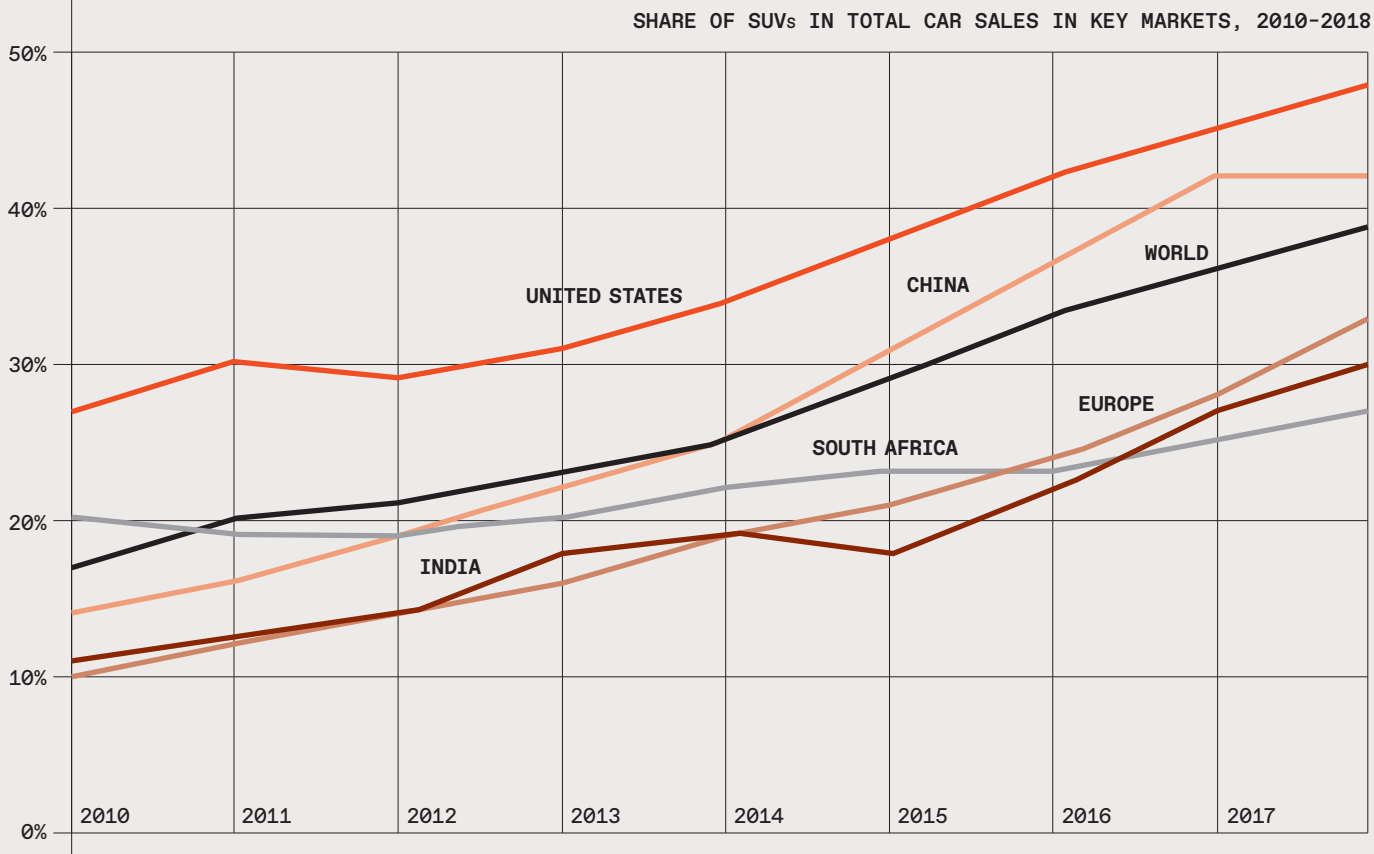
Crosstalk



SUVs Ascendant

Growth in SUV use could more than offset carbon savings from electric vehicles

The sport utility vehicle has become an acronym, but the SUV category's name is questionable. What does sport have to do with shopping in Walmart or waiting in a traffic jam? As for the utility, is my Honda Civic not of use, capable of performing several different functions? And the category itself is splitting up, like an amoeba, into two major subcategories, car SUVs and truck SUVs. Each contains still-finer divisions, ranging from mini (Nissan Kicks) to extended length (Lincoln Navigator).

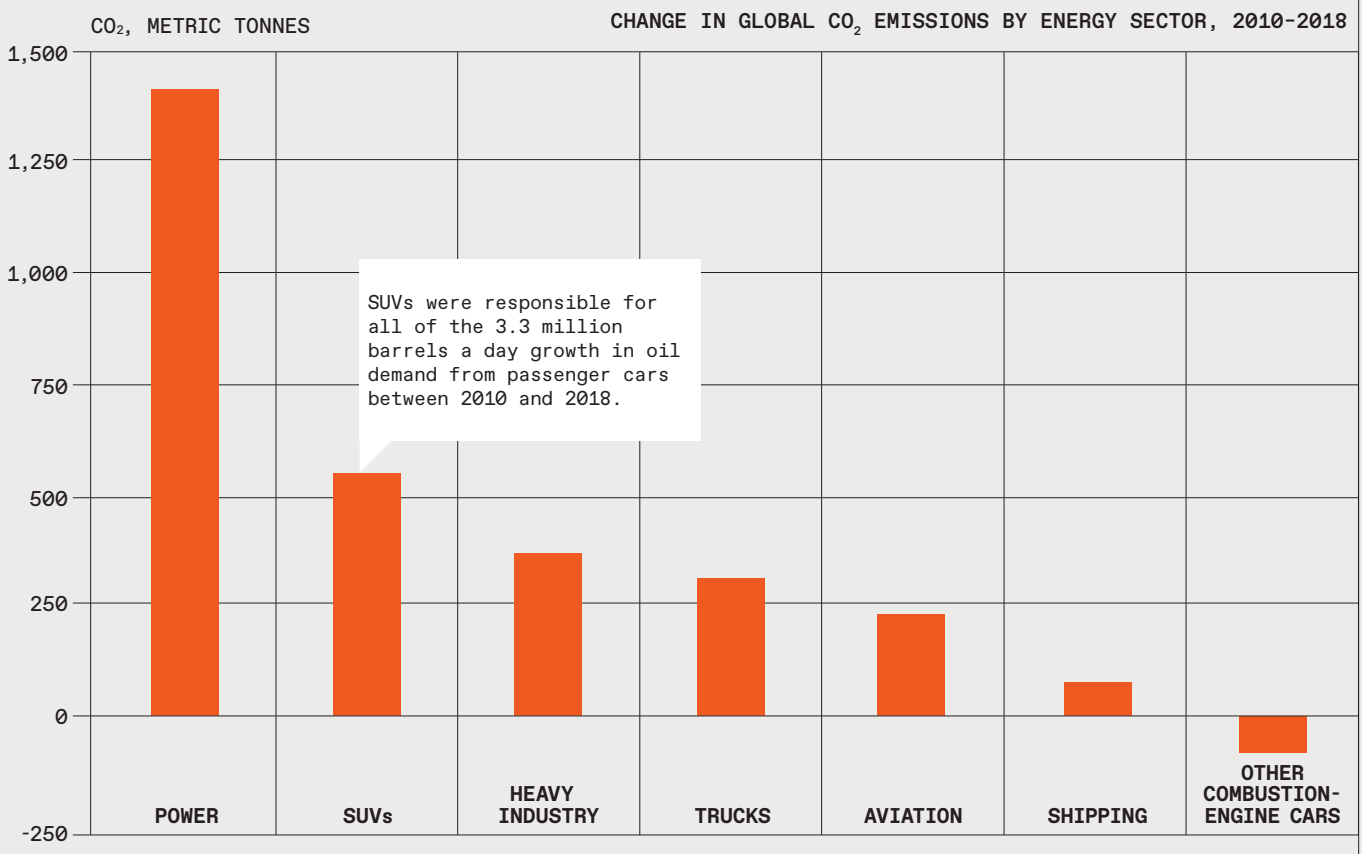
No matter, the acronym has stuck, demand is still growing, and sales are padding automakers' earnings worldwide. It further reinforces Kenneth Boulding's 47-year-old definition of a driver as a "knight with the mobility of the aristocrat," the envy of the peasants who go on foot. Today's SUV driver, however, looks down not on pedestrians but on paupers in mere cars.

In 2000, the average U.S. car SUV was nearly 15 percent heavier than a car, and by 2020 the difference had shrunk to only about 6 percent. But most of this reduction reflects the intervening gain in average car mass (up by about 6 percent, compared with a 2 percent reduction for the average SUV).

The production-weighted annual carbon footprint of all domestic and imported SUVs has improved by an impressive 33 percent since its worst year, in 1995, but in 2019 the average U.S. car SUV still emitted annually about 15 percent more CO_2 than a car. There are few features that add more to your automotive carbon footprint than the sheer weight you carry around.

In the wider world, the average SUV emits 25 percent more carbon than the average car, and

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL ENERGY AGENCY



there were some 250 million SUVs on the road in 2020. That's several times more than enough to wipe out any decarbonization gains that came from the 10-million-odd electric cars. In recent years, SUVs have been the second highest cause of rising carbon-dioxide emissions, behind electricity generation and ahead of heavy industry, trucking, and aviation. If this trend continues, the additional SUVs on the road by 2040 could offset the carbon savings from more than 100 million electric vehicles.

The United States started the trend. SUVs took up 1.8 percent of the U.S. light-vehicle market in 1975, rising to 5.1 percent a decade later and to 18.9 percent by 2000. The financial crisis of 2008 induced only a small dip and by 2010 SUVs made up nearly 30 percent of all sales and reached half of the market in 2020.

Europe, too, has set aside its former disdain for large U.S. models, and in 2019 SUVs made up 38 percent of new vehicle sales there. A lot of those SUVs have diesel engines, and as Volkswagen's much-publicized emissions scandal has made clear, "clean" is not the right adjective to describe those machines. In China, SUVs are more popular still, accounting for a bit more than 40 percent of new vehicles sold in 2019.

The additional SUVs on the road by 2040 could offset the carbon savings from more than 100 million electric vehicles.

Again, Boulding's memorable conclusion comes to mind: "Once having tasted the delights of a society in which almost everyone can be a knight, it is hard to go back to being peasants," he wrote, in *Science* magazine, back in 1974. And now that SUVs offer an even taller steed, ever fewer would-be knights can resist them, and the peasant category has now shifted, even in China, to the owners of ordinary cars. Hence the green-minded bureaucrats in Beijing and Brussels will find it hard to pry SUV steering wheels from drivers' hands and will have to resort to mandatory electrification of these addictive, oversize machines. ■

PORTRAIT BY SERGIO ALBIAC