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STUDY: Average car size is increasing — will roads still be safe for small cars and pedestrians?



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Large vehicles dominate U.S. auto showrooms and highways alike. SUVs and crossovers are extremely popular: Together, they command [around 50% market share](#) for all passenger vehicles sold in the U.S. Automakers' decisions to eliminate sedans from their lineups directly reflects this

statistic – and may cause disaster for other drivers and pedestrians by putting larger, heavier vehicles on the road.

We surveyed more than 1,500 Americans to determine their feelings on vehicle safety. The results paint a clear picture of the shift in tastes and preferences: Americans staunchly prefer larger vehicles [that cost less to insure](#) and make them feel safer overall. We found that:

- Americans feel safest in SUVs compared to other vehicles.
- Women felt 3.5x safer in SUVs than pickup trucks compared to men.
- Men were nearly twice as likely to feel safest in pickup trucks compared to women.

Below, we'll dig deeper into the story of average car size and how it always seems to be increasing. We'll also explore our survey findings and discuss whether SUVs pose a threat to pedestrians and drivers of smaller cars, and whether Americans really trust the pickup trucks they drive.

Average car size varies by vehicle type

Many factors lead to design changes that increase a vehicle's length, width or height. Passenger space and cargo room will add length to a car, while safety features like side airbags and lane departure sensors can stretch a vehicle's width beyond the size of average parking spaces.

Average car length

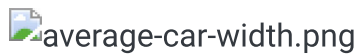


According to [Car Roar](#), the length of the average car is 14.7 feet, approximately the length of a Nissan Versa sedan. Vehicle length grows to accommodate more passengers, more cargo space, or a larger engine. Check out the numbers on the shortest and longest vehicles available:

- The shortest passenger car available in the U.S. is the Chevrolet Spark at just under **12 feet** long.

- The longest passenger car available in the U.S. is the long-wheelbase version of the Rolls-Royce Phantom, stretching almost **20 feet long**.
- The longest noncommercial vehicle is the Ford Super Duty line of full-size pickup trucks, which measure over **22 feet long**.

Average car width



According to [VEHQ](#), the average width of a car is 5.8 feet.

Vehicle widths usually vary due to aerodynamic performance or added safety features. Here are some fast facts on vehicle widths:

- The most narrow vehicle is the Chevrolet Spark at 5.2 feet wide, making it the vehicle with the smallest footprint in the U.S.
- The widest vehicle outside the ultra-luxury segment is the exceptionally aerodynamic Tesla Model X, measuring 7.4 feet wide with mirrors unfolded.
- The widest noncommercial vehicle title goes to the Ram 3500 with dual rear wheels, a heavy-duty pickup truck that measures an astonishing 8.7 feet wide without its mirrors.

Average car size is growing to match demand

One major difference between the American automobile market and international markets is that American cars are built bigger. We're not just talking about pickup trucks and lift kits, though; if you compare product offerings from the same manufacturer, you'll find smaller vehicle variants in Europe, South America and parts of Asia, while the U.S. (and China, the world's largest car market) are privy to much larger options.

How much is the average car size increasing?

Cars are getting bigger to match Americans' desire for more space. In 2019, the Big Three U.S. automakers collectively began to abandon the small car and sedan segments [because of](#)

decreasing market share. This means that more trucks, SUVs and crossovers fill Ford, General Motors, and Fiat Chrysler showrooms as these brands forecast increased demand for larger vehicles.

However, SUVs aren't the only large vehicles on U.S. roads. Average car size across the board is increasing.

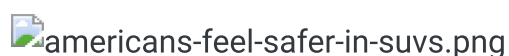
The country's most popular car (the Toyota Camry), pickup truck (Ford's F-150) and SUV/crossover (Toyota's RAV4) each have multiple design generations and more than 25 years under their belts. Notably, these vehicles see consistent size increases each time they're redesigned. As industry sales leaders, they set an example for other cars to follow: Bigger size means bigger demand.



SUVs are more desirable than ever — but at what cost?

We surveyed more than 1,500 Americans to hear their thoughts on safety when it comes to vehicle size. It turns out bigger is usually better, or at least it's preferred: As an occupant, 50% of all respondents felt safest in SUVs compared to cars or pickup trucks.

Americans who prefer SUVs might be interested to know that they're the [most likely passenger vehicle segment to roll over](#) in an accident. Rollover accidents account for one-fifth of all fatal crashes in the U.S., so even large SUV drivers should exercise extreme caution on the road and avoid driving recklessly.



Only 23% of Americans feel safest when riding in a car, and it's not hard to imagine why. Drivers of cars might experience limited visibility around them as larger vehicles create blind spots in their mirrors. And according to the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety \(IIHS\)](#), driver deaths in small cars are about twice as likely as larger ones, regardless of vehicle age. Even when small cars fare well in crash safety tests, they're not likely to perform as well in accidents with heavier vehicles.

Does this mean that drivers of small cars should trade them in for SUVs? Not necessarily – the global popularity of SUVs is complicating efforts to regulate fuel emissions.

[Congestion tolls](#) are in the works for New York City and other major U.S. metros, and can easily be adapted to charge by vehicle size, as is the practice in Paris, London and other European cities. This means it could cost you as much as \$20 to drive an SUV into a city's center districts, not to mention the heavy pedestrian traffic you'd have to contend with.

Pedestrian safety: compromised in an SUV world

Crash safety standards reveal that accidents involving SUVs and pedestrians are trending in the wrong direction. Fatal pedestrian accidents involving SUVs [increased 81% from 2009 to 2016](#), and the IIHS estimates that SUVs are still twice as likely as cars to kill pedestrians in an accident.



Many SUVs have high hoods that can throw a pedestrian forward in a collision, causing severe injury or death. To adapt to new regulations and to reduce safety risks, some manufacturers have changed their designs to make their SUVs safer for pedestrians and small cars. Regardless, SUVs still pose significant dangers to pedestrians. What does this mean for pedestrians as automakers pump more SUVs off assembly lines and into dealerships? Pedestrians should be cautious in the presence of vehicles on a roadway – always cross at a crosswalk, and avoid using headphones or a phone when near moving vehicles.

Pickup trucks: popular but seen as untrustworthy

While SUVs are enjoying a recent sales spike, pickup trucks are perennially the [most popular vehicles](#) in the country.

Despite their rampant popularity, most people don't feel as safe in pickup trucks as in other vehicles. This could be due to the illusion of a more compromised vehicle because of their open beds, or because pickups are notoriously dangerous [in collisions with small cars](#).



We found that, while similar numbers of men and women drive pickup trucks, men were far more likely to feel safest as pickup truck occupants. In fact, only 16% of women feel that pickup trucks are the safest vehicle choice. Only time will tell if [new electric vehicles](#) in pickup truck guise will prove safer for small cars and pedestrians, but America's infatuation with trucks is not likely to end soon.

Pedestrians and drivers of smaller cars must exercise caution around larger vehicles that might have trouble seeing them. SUV and pickup truck drivers should know their vehicles and be well aware of their blind spots, and should drive safely and defensively. Minor dings can carry hefty price tags on heavy, expensive vehicles, and avoidable traffic accidents are sure to [raise the cost of your insurance premiums](#).

[IHS Markit](#) projects new SUV sales will continue to eat into the market share of cars, while pickup trucks will hold steady. If this pattern continues, the majority of vehicles on the road will be utility vehicles in a few years. Regardless of the vehicle you drive, or if you drive one at all, always keep an eye out for road hazards, dangerous drivers and exceptionally large vehicles.


Methodology

This study was conducted for The Zebra using Google Surveys. The sample consisted of no fewer than 1,500 completed responses. Post-stratification weighting has been applied to ensure an accurate and reliable representation of the total population. This survey was conducted in May 2021.

Sources: IIHS 1 | 2 | GHSA | Consumer Reports 1 | 2 | New York Times | Ford Motor Company | GFEI | J.D. Power | U.S. News & World Report | New Car Test Drive| Motor 1 | Guinness World Records

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