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Trapped Victims In Car Crashes



— Jack Anderson

THE government is moving rapidly toward making it possible to survive the impact of a car wreck, but it's barely moving at all to make it easier to get out of your car afterwards.

The result is that 3500 persons are killed in wrecked-car fires each year and another 1000 drown in submerged vehicles, according to data cited by a University of Oklahoma research team under contract with the Department of Transportation.

The researchers' obscure report, entitled "Escape Worthiness of Vehicles and Occupant Survival," concludes, moreover, "enough detail is available to establish that entrapment without fire or submergence is frequent enough to be a serious problem."

Transportation Department officials say the Oklahoma group is continuing its work, and they point out that standards for flammability of car upholstery have already been set.

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BUT WE have searched in vain through the confidential, \$40.5 million National Highway Safety Bureau 1973 research budget for any sign and the bureau is doing the kind of large-scale research that will be needed to establish full standards for escape-worthiness.

What's more, the flammability standard set by the department is what the Oklahoma research team already found to be the norm in the cars they tested.

And there is apparently no use looking

to the car industry itself to take the lead in making vehicles more fire-resistant. For the companies wanted the government to set a far weaker fabrics standard than the burn rate of four inches per minute which was finally established.

As the Oklahoma study put it: "The 15-inch-per-minute horizontal burning rate advocated by the automobile manufacturers for vehicle interior materials is equivalent to the burning rate of ordinary paper towels."

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THE REPORT indicated strongly that the chances of survival in a car that plunges into water are slim. "The air bubble entrapped in (the test) vehicle could be breathed less than one minute by the front-seat passengers and only slightly greater than a minute by experienced divers in the rear seat," it said.

Equally treacherous after an accident are buses, especially school buses with push-out windows, the researchers discovered.

"Push-out windows pose significant problems as an escape route from a bus," the report says. "They are often inadequate to prevent passenger ejection and/or too difficult to open for escape."

Intercity buses, too, were found to have escape problems: "The adequacy of window exits for escape when passengers are injured is doubtful because of the problems in entering the exits as well as the height of the exit above the ground."

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