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Van involved in N.B. crash a 'death trap on wheels'

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Sandor Fizli/Reuters

BATHURST, N.B. -- The type of passenger van that crashed in New Brunswick on Saturday, killing seven teenagers and a teacher, is considered so unsafe on the road the United States government has banned schools across that country from purchasing the vehicle to transport students.

The Safety Forum, a Washington D.C.-based, consumer consulting group, calls it "a death trap on wheels -- a trap merely waiting an opportunity to spring on unwary passengers and drivers."

There are no federal regulations in Canada, and no provincial rules in New Brunswick, prohibiting the use of the vehicle by schools.

Wayne Lord, the coach of the Bathurst High School Phantoms basketball team, lost his wife and seven players late Friday night on a dark, slick, snow-covered highway.

Driving home after a game in Moncton, Lord lost control of the van in bad weather, say RCMP investigators. The vehicle "fishtailed" on the two-lane highway, police say, before it skidded into oncoming traffic and was broadsided by a tractor-trailer truck.

The 1997 Ford Club Wagon is one of a handful of 15-passenger van models that the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) issued four consumer safety advisories about between 2000 and 2005, more than for any other vehicle type.

The U.S. advisories said such vans are prone to fishtailing and are difficult to bring back under control, particularly at high speeds, and especially when the vans are heavily loaded.

Those advisories also warned of a high centre of gravity that shifts dangerously rearward as the van loads are increased, making 15-passenger vans even more prone to deadly rollovers than many SUVs.

It's not clear if the Bathurst High van rolled over before it was torn apart by the oncoming truck.

The Bathurst High van was carrying 12 of 15 possible passengers, including the driver, when it crashed.

"If you have any loss of control for any reason, it's very difficult to get the van back under control," says Jeff Wiggington, a Texas lawyer who has campaigned hard to have the vans removed from U.S. roads.

Because of the weight on the rear axle, says Mr. Wiggington, "the front tires are less responsive than you expect them to be to any steering inputs, so the driver is deceived into steering too much or too little into what happens on the roadway.

"The bottom line is that a minor error often becomes fatal in a 15-passenger van, whereas in most vehicles it is not."

The four recent NHTSA advisories prompted the U.S. Congress to make it illegal for American schools to buy new, 15-passenger vans for transporting their students.

Although many U.S. states now also prohibit schools from using vans, the vehicles are still legally used by dozens of other organizations, from colleges to nursing homes to church groups.

Transport Canada, which regulates the type of vehicles that can be sold in Canada and issues safety warnings on vehicle defects, has no restrictions on the importation or sale of 15-passenger vans in this country, a spokeswoman for the department said yesterday.

Transport Canada has also issued no safety advisories about 15 passenger vans. However, following a letter sent to the government from the Canadian Standards Association this summer, the department has launched a review of the vans, to decide if they should be subject to the same, stricter safety requirements as regular school buses.

It falls to provincial governments in Canada to regulate what kinds of vehicles schools can legally use to transport their students.

While 15-passenger vans are banned from school use in a few provinces such as Nova Scotia, in most provinces, including New Brunswick, there are no similar restrictions.

The only requirement imposed by New Brunswick and other provinces is that drivers of 15-passenger vans have a Class-4 commercial licence, a higher level of certification than a regular driving licence.

"While driving 15-passenger vans is not always inherently dangerous, there are some situations that can result in erratic vehicle response that an inexperienced driver might not be able to control, and which could result in a collision or rollover," says a "Safety Information" website maintained by the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Alberta.

John McLaughlin, superintendent of the Bathurst school district, said on Monday he was unaware of any safety concerns surrounding the model of van that Bathurst High had used for years before it was destroyed in Friday's tragedy.

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