

24093 After Paris's coup against SUVs, the UK should slam the brakes on these polluting monsters too

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Paris has developed a taste for better city living. Its vote to begin pricing sports utility vehicles off its streets by tripling parking charges is part of a diet for reversing autobesity – the trend by car manufacturers towards larger, more dangerous and polluting cars.

It's not difficult to see what has driven Parisians' anger : the reasons to dislike SUVs form a tailback so long it's hard to see the front of the queue.

First, they get in the way. Size is a selling point and in the UK alone, 150,000 cars were sold in 2019 that were too big for a standard parking space. Potential green benefits from better technology have been cancelled out by vehicles getting bigger. Average car width in the EU and UK has been growing by 1cm every two years. Astonishingly, in the US the average weight of a new car is almost two tonnes.

It takes a lot of materials to build bigger cars and an increasing amount of energy to move them. With bulk comes pollution and waste. In the decade from 2010, the International Energy Agency found that "SUVs were the second-largest contributor to the increase in global CO₂ emissions" after the power sector, but ahead of heavy industry, trucks and aviation. Emissions from the motor sector could have fallen 30% more between 2010 and 2022 if car sizes hadn't grown.

Then there is the other problem: electric or not, SUVs are killers. People in a light vehicle are three times more likely to get seriously injured when in collision with a much bigger car than one of similar weight; and for pedestrians and cyclists, the risk of death rises 30% if the bonnet of the car that hits them is 10cm higher than average.

For these reasons, Paris's vote against the SUV is a vote against four-wheeled antisocial behaviour. Like most cities, Paris wasn't built for cars. Being overwhelmed by SUVs – the motoring equivalent of an angry pedestrian with their elbows out, blowing smoke in people's faces – has been a step too far.

But how did we get here and what can be done? SUVs didn't just swarm on to city streets like a natural phenomenon – even if that's the impression the adverts like to create. In a very short period of time, consumer behaviour was switched on to the SUV by massive marketing campaigns and new consumer debt models, in the shape of personal contract purchase loans.

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