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Did Police Car Defects Cause Fire?

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Wednesday's police chase that ended in a fiery crash along I-94 in southern Wisconsin is the latest in a string of dangerous accidents involving Ford Crown Victorias.

The cars, commonly used as police cruisers, have been implicated in the deaths of more than a dozen officers nationwide.

The police officers escaped unharmed on Wednesday, but others haven't been so lucky. Over the past 20 years, 14 police officers have died nationwide, after their Crown Victoria cruisers caught fire when hit from behind. This latest crash will only add to the controversy over the cruiser's safety.

The Wisconsin crash followed an all-too familiar pattern -- a Ford Crown Victoria police cruiser was smashed from behind by a minivan being chased by police. The cruiser erupted into a fireball.

Amazingly, in this case, both the cops and the suspects walked away.

"The minute they hit it was a wall of flames. Couple minutes later, we saw two bodies walking out of the flames, out of the fire," one eyewitness said.

Ford estimates 85 percent of all police agencies use Crown Victorias with 400,000 cruisers in service nationwide.

But a national safety study showed that from 1994 to 2000, Crown Victorias had twice the rate of fires in rear impact collisions compared to other cars.

In Arizona alone, three police officers burned to death in Crown Victorias in the past 4 years. And a fourth Phoenix cop lived through a fire, but was horribly disfigured.

Wisconsin authorities aren't sure in this case that the Crown Victoria is to blame for the explosion.

"The nature of this collision is such that I don't know that any other vehicle would have done anything other than explode," said Racine County Sheriff Robert Carlson.

Still, critics insist the design of the Crown Victoria makes it particularly vulnerable with its vertical fuel tank located behind the rear axle in the so-called crush zone -- an easy target in a rear-end crash

Ford insists the Crown Victoria is safe and meets both federal crash standards and the company's own higher standards.

But a year ago, Ford began retrofitting older models with a shield to protect the fuel tank. Starting in 2005, Ford will begin offering fire-suppression technology in the police cruisers.

The controversial squad car remains the target of four class-action lawsuits and a flurry of individual suits.

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