



Dr. Kellen Silverthorn is Just For Canadian Dentists' automotive writer. He tries to keep one convertible and/or one track-day car in the family fleet.

The SUV rules

All hail the mighty sport-utility vehicle, which now tops all car sales

A recent industry bulletin announced that SUVs had overtaken the North American sales of passenger cars. This ends more than a century of “cars” dominating passenger-vehicle sales.

SUVs have been around long before any of us were born. For decades, they were stuck in their tiny, stagnant, fanfare-free corner of the market. The key marketplace transition occurred in the late 1980s, when the volume brands at the Big Three, together with Toyota and Nissan, released four-door, all-wheel-drive SUV versions of their small pick-up trucks.

Back then, a partner in my practice bought the Toyota version, which at \$35,000 struck me as outrageously expensive at the time. That was well into BMW-sport-sedan price territory. Nevertheless, within three years, five of six practice partners had one of these new-size, four-door SUVs.

In our household, the SUV embodied the “family car” for the next 26 years. Our children knew nothing else growing up. Most of the households in their peer groups had the same experience. These vehicles had space and all-weather capability. Granted, their all-terrain capability was essentially wasted on us. But crucially, for the

ego-fragile, the capability and stance of the SUVs were far more cool than the ubiquitous mini-vans.

By the year 2000, the remaining volume brands had all fielded SUVs. More interesting was that many premium full-line brands now had mid-size SUVs too: BMW, Lexus, Mercedes, Audi and Acura.

There wasn't really a marketplace need for even more SUV choices, but that didn't stop the piling on by niche manufacturers. Porsche was already a profitable, storied marque in 2003 when it brought out its Cayenne SUV. Pundits predicted the brand's doom when it ventured out of its light-weight-sports-car heritage to introduce a 5,600-pound five-seater SUV. Soon Porsche was selling far more SUVs than sports cars.

Over the next decade, SUV offerings differentiated further—Porsche, Mercedes, BMW and Jeep brought out 500-plus-horsepower, V8-turbocharged or supercharged, performance-oriented SUVs. Demonstrating alternate directions, hybrid-electric SUVs arrived from Ford, Toyota, Lexus and GM. Range Rover debuted the first aluminum-body luxury SUV in 2013. Tesla introduced the first all-electric SUV in 2015, Model X, their most expensive model.

Fifteen years after Porsche's 2003 risk-and-reward plunge, Canadians can now buy SUVs from such unlikely brands as Jaguar, Bentley, Volvo, Maserati, Lamborghini and Alfa Romeo. And now the most storied brands in each of the sport and luxury categories, Ferrari and Rolls Royce respectively, have also promised upcoming SUVs.

At the other end of the market, millennials have made “cute ute” SUVs (subcompact crossovers like the Honda CRV or Fiat 500X) a stronger-selling class of vehicle than the Toyota Corolla, Honda Civic or Mazda 3. In the emerging markets, China now buys more passenger vehicles than either Europe or North America. And in Beijing, the premium-brand SUV is seen as a practical status symbol.

Vehicle manufacturers follow trends closely. It takes years and hundreds of millions of dollars to develop an all-new vehicle. An enormous bet rides on making the right call of the future marketplace. By any measure, the SUV's totem is trending strongly up, and the sedan's strongly down. These trends now have decades of inertia.

Our family's third SUV is coming up for replacement. It's a foregone conclusion that its replacement will be another SUV. Ease of ingress and egress is one factor in favour of the SUV. Easy sight lines to all four corners of the vehicle is another, as are sightlines in traffic. Rarely do we encounter an item that the SUV's cargo bay will not swallow.

Mini-vans remain better in each of these realms. And sedans also offer a superior ride, acceleration, handling and gas mileage, as well as equal all-weather capability. And yet those features don't seem to be enough to offset the attractions of the SUV.

It isn't just our family's assessment, but that of buying families around the globe. With such dominance in the marketplace, the pressure is on the many talented SUV designers to lessen their vehicles' footprints (physical and carbon) and still outshine the competition. I expect the SUV's hegemony to last until the autonomous car assumes the mantle. ●

