

THE MOST & LEAST RELIABLE CARS

Who's up, who's down, and what systems are causing major problems

CONTINUING STRUGGLES with communications and infotainment systems, as well as problems with recently developed transmission technologies, are the top trouble areas reported in Consumer Reports' 2015 Annual Auto Survey.

Consumers want their car infotainment systems to be as capable as the latest smartphones. But vehicles have lengthy development and production cycles, which means that car tech often lags behind the rapid-fire release of smartphones and apps. As a result, many infotainment systems end up disappointing consumers in terms of how they operate and how reliably they operate.

More troubling is that many new transmissions developed to help meet heightened fuel-economy standards are having some significant problems. That's happening whether it's a complex system such as a dual-clutch gearbox, a continuously variable transmission, or one with eight or nine speeds. Many vehicles require repair and replacements because of rough shifting among the gears and slipping CVT belts.

Those trouble areas have resulted in several automakers dropping sharply in our predicted-reliability scores, which



KIA SORENTO
The Korean brand had the industry's most reliable midsize SUV.

are based on subscribers reporting on more than 740,000 vehicles in their garages. But other automakers have seen sharp movement upward. Among the highlights:

- Two Korean automakers, Kia and Hyundai, are considerably stronger. The sister brands finished sixth and ninth, respectively. For the first time, Kia beat the stalwart Japanese brand Honda, and by a significant margin.
- Lexus pulled off a rare feat, garnering top reliability marks for all seven vehicle lines scored in our survey. But it was the only strong Japanese luxury brand. Honda's Acura brand has plummeted because of problems with in-car electronics and new transmissions. Nissan's Infiniti brand has continued its downward trajectory because of similar problems with its InTouch infotainment system.
- Although no Honda vehicles rated below average, the badge doesn't shine like it used to, largely because of glitches with its infotainment system in redesigned and freshened models.
- For the second year, Buick was the only domestic brand in the top 10. Cadillac dropped to near the bottom, still plagued by its CUE infotainment system.
- Ford remains in the lower half of the rankings but showed significant gains, with most of its cars scoring average or better. The redesigned F-150 was a bright spot, scoring above average in its first year. But the first-year Mustang had issues with its body hardware, drive shaft, and stability/traction control systems.
- Audi, once a sinkhole of service problems, continued its recent roll and finished third, just behind Lexus and Toyota.
- The laggards? The Fiat-Chrysler brands (Chrysler, Dodge, Jeep, Ram, and Fiat) finished at or near the bottom again.

In commenting on the automaker's poor performance, Matt Liddane, vice president of quality for Fiat Chrysler Automotive North America, said: "We greatly value customer feedback. We're significantly accelerating our pace of improvement. We need to continue to push harder."

Our survey is a measure of how reliable a new car you buy today is likely to be, based on the past three model years of problem areas reported by consumers. (For more, see "How to Use the Charts," on page 65.)

Note that new-car predicted-reliability scores are separate from our road-test scores, which are based on the performance, comfort, and road manners of the cars we buy.

So a great-performing car like the VW Golf may be a service nightmare. And a routine, uninspiring appliance like the Toyota Corolla may be quite trouble-free. Though below-average reliability prevents us from recommending a car, it doesn't factor into its road-test results.



TESLA RELIABILITY DOESN'T MATCH ITS HIGH PERFORMANCE

TESLA MOTORS' all-electric Model S sedan got high marks in Consumer Reports' 50-plus tests involving driving dynamics and livability, and it consumed energy at the electric equivalent of 84 miles per gallon (87 MPGe in the P85D trim). It's the best-performing car we've ever tested.

But its predicted reliability is another matter.

We received about 1,400 survey responses from Model S owners who chronicled an array of detailed and complicated maladies. From that data, we forecast that owning a Tesla is likely to involve a worse-than-average overall rate.

The main problem areas are the drivetrain, power equipment, charging equipment, giant iPad-like center console, and body and sunroof squeaks, rattles, and leaks.

Is Tesla's newfangled EV technology causing the reliability issues? The Nissan Leaf EV has been above average in reliability for several years; it's average this year. But the Tesla is a much higher-performance and higher-tech vehicle, with more than double the driving range of the Leaf.

The Tesla also wasn't the only high-performance vehicle that fell below average in reliability. Others include the BMW X5 and 5 Series, and the Chevrolet Corvette.

When automakers roll out new technology, be it infotainment, transmissions, or engine variations, it often has a deleterious effect on vehicle reliability. Tesla is not only the poster child for a new type of high-performance, high-mileage EV, but it also has been adding complex new variations as assembly-line updates, such as all-wheel drive this year. So it's not surprising to see

problems continue to crop up.

Despite those concerns, our data show that Tesla owner satisfaction is still very high: 97 percent of owners said they would definitely buy their car again. It appears that Tesla has been responsive to replacing faulty motors, differentials, brakes, and infotainment systems, all with a minimum of fuss to owners.

When asked for a comment, a Tesla spokesperson said in an email: "Close communication with our customers enables Tesla to receive input, proactively address issues, and quickly fix problems. Model S over-the-air software updates allow Tesla to diagnose and fix most bugs without the need to come in for service. In instances when hardware needs to be fixed, we keep the customer's convenience and satisfaction top of mind."

The real problem may be down the road, when Tesla migrates its technology from the \$127,000 P85D down to the \$35,000 Model 3, which it says will be launched in about two years.

It's one thing to have a quirky, problematic car that sells 20,000 units per year to wealthy people who probably own at least one backup vehicle. It's quite another when Tesla scales up to its 2020 projection of 200,000 U.S. Model 3 buyers, who may not have the luxury of being so forgiving.



LEARN

For more on predicted auto reliability, be sure to go to [ConsumerReports.org/reliability](https://www.ConsumerReports.org/reliability)

Big Gainers, Bigger Losers

BRANDS THAT GAINED THE MOST

Ford +6

Kia +4

Hyundai +4

Volkswagen +4

Though the Ford brand remained in the lower half of the standings, it did move up six places from last year's survey, buoyed by good first-year scores for the redesigned F-150 pickup and Expedition SUV. Nine of the 13 Fords we scored were average or better. Kia and Hyundai moved up four spots, placing among the top 10 brands. Volkswagen also moved up four steps, to 13th place. Most VWs showed average reliability, but the redesigned Golf had a bad first year.

MODELS THAT GAINED THE MOST

Volkswagen CC

Ford C-Max

Mini Countryman

Scion FR-S/Subaru BRZ

**Chrysler Town & Country/
Dodge Grand Caravan**

The stylish CC climbed from the depths to become VW's only vehicle with above-average reliability. Ford's C-Max hybrid had a terrible first couple of years but has now improved to average. Mini's mini-SUV Countryman earned an average score after years in the doldrums. The substantially similar FR-S and BRZ sports cars were unusually troublesome for either a Toyota or a Subaru, but both are now average. The long-running Chrysler and Dodge minivans scraped up an average reliability score for the first time in many years.

BRANDS THAT FELL THE FURTHEST

Acura -7

Cadillac -7

Porsche -5

Usually reliable Acura has slipped badly, largely because of transmission and in-car electronics problems in its newest sedans, the RLX and TLX. Cadillac dropped to near the bottom, beset with infotainment and build-quality problems in its newest vehicles. Porsche dropped from ninth to 14th place because of a declining score for the Cayman and a below-average debut for the Macan.

MODELS THAT FELL THE FURTHEST

Acura RLX

Chevrolet Corvette

Dodge Challenger

Kia Rio

Acura's flagship RLX and the sporty Corvette and Challenger dropped from last year's average reliability to far below average. Kia's only unreliable car, the Rio, fell from above average to below average.