In 2009, Toyota accelerator pedals began mysteriously getting stuck, at times trapping panicked drivers in out-of-control cars that tragically crashed.

Here’s the quick backstory on the “sticky pedal” crisis: In 2009, a man phoned 911 to report that his accelerator pedal was stuck and he couldn’t get the car to stop. He said his brakes weren’t working. Ultimately, his car crashed into another and then plunged into a ravine. Everyone inside the vehicle was killed.

The 911 call [went viral](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1248177/Toyota-recall-Last-words-father-family-died-Lexus-crash.html), and the scandal broke wide open. Over the next five years, an estimated 90 people died in Toyotas that mysteriously accelerated. Toyota recalled millions of vehicles but was accused of concealing information about the flawed pedals. In 2014, [the company paid](http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/toyota-pay-12b-hiding-deadly-unintended-acceleration/story?id=22972214) $1.2 billion to avoid prosecution for covering up information about problems with “unintended acceleration” that the FBI said Toyota “knew was deadly.”

At the time, two theories emerged to explain why these pedals suddenly had minds of their own. One involved software malfunctions, while the other blamed floor mats that slid around and pinned the pedals down.

But according to Gladwell, the software explanation doesn’t hold up considering the fact that multiple tests have shown that even when a driver is pushing the throttle to the floor, hitting the brakes will stop the car.

And [an investigation by the Department of Transportation](http://www.caranddriver.com/features/its-all-your-fault-the-dot-renders-its-verdict-on-toyotas-unintended-acceleration-scare-feature) in 2011 found that floor mats only accounted for a small fraction the accidents.

The real culprit? Human error. More often than not, drivers who reported that their accelerators were stuck were inadvertently flooring it and thinking they were pressing the brakes. Data from many of the “black boxes” from cars involved in incidents of unintended acceleration showed that in most cases, the brakes were *never even touched.*

The drivers were often in vehicles that were new or unfamiliar to them, or for whatever reason, they just got confused.

One of the more frustrating aspects of this whole fiasco was the media’s response. Instead of alerting drivers to the potential dangers of confusing the accelerator with the brake — which could happen to any of us — the focus was on Toyota’s cover up, the scary and unpredictable software in cars, and of course, the floor mats.