

Court Shatters Claims Involving Exploding Sunroof

MARCH 31, 2026

A district court in Ohio granted summary judgment to automaker Kia despite evidence that the panoramic sunroof on one of its cars “spontaneously exploded and shattered.”^[1] The court rejected the plaintiff’s warranty claims, ruling that he failed to produce “any evidence of a design defect.”^[2]

One might wonder how a sunroof that spontaneously exploded could *not* have been defective. But as the court in *Kondash v. Kia Motors* explained, liability for design defect requires more than showing that something went wrong with the product; it requires “evidence as to precisely *how* the [product] was defective.”^[3] And the plaintiff offered no such evidence, instead pointing to a “grab bag” of design features—material, thickness, shape—without identifying which one made the sunroof defective or “caused it to shatter.”^[4] Without evidence of a specific defect, the plaintiff’s claim rested on “pure speculation.”^[5]

The plaintiff also lacked expert testimony. He tried to avoid this requirement by arguing that an expert is not necessary when a product is “patently defective.”^[6] But Kia presented evidence that earlier road-debris damage could have caused the sunroof to shatter, so “the fact that the sunroof spontaneously shattered is not enough, on its own, to establish that it was patently defective.”^[7]

Finally, the plaintiff failed to identify a feasible alternative design.^[8] He argued that “other vehicles on the road that are not installed with a panoramic sunroof” provide “sufficient evidence of alternative designs.”^[9] But those “are different *products*,” the court explained, not “alternative panoramic-sunroof designs that would have reduced the risk of breakage.”^[10]

This decision reinforces three legal principles that defendants can leverage to defeat a design-defect claim at summary judgment.

First, ***plaintiffs must identify defects with specificity***. Even when something obviously goes wrong with a product, the plaintiff must produce evidence of a specific design flaw. A plaintiff cannot survive summary judgment simply by listing several design features and inviting the jury to speculate about which one, if any, caused the injury.^[11]

Second, ***unrebutted evidence of possible alternative causes may result in summary judgment***. Defendants may defeat a design-defect claim by producing evidence of possible alternative causes, even without proving the actual cause. The burden is not on defendants to prove what caused the injury, as that would constitute improper burden

shifting. Plaintiffs bear the burden of disproving suggested alternative causes, and their failure to rebut them may compel summary judgment—at least where the plaintiff claims the product is “patently defective.”^[12]

Third, **alternative products are not alternative designs**. Many states require plaintiffs to prove a feasible alternative design as part of their prima facie case. Alternative *designs* should not be confused with alternative *products*—that is, a plaintiff cannot satisfy her burden to show a design defect in one product by pointing to the existence of a different product.^[13]

[1] *Kondash v. Kia Motors Am., Inc.*, 2026 WL 763975, at *1 (S.D. Ohio Mar. 18, 2026).

[2] *Id.* at 1.

[3] *Id.* at 4.

[4] *Id.*

[5] *Id.*

[6] *Id.* at 5.

[7] *Id.*

[8] *Id.* at 6.

[9] *Id.* (cleaned up).

[10] *Id.* (emphasis added).

[11] *Id.* at 4.

[12] *Id.* at 5.

[13] *Id.* at 6.

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