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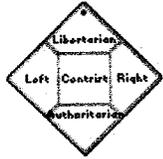
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Do Seat Belt Laws Work?

by John Semmens

Many states that have passed mandatory seat belt-use laws have required that evidence of the law's effectiveness be produced for the law to escape automatic expiration. A recently published report-"Arizona Hospital Costs for Seat Belt Use vs. Non-Use 1989, 1990, 1991"-from the Governor's Office of Highway Safety purports to be the needed evidence for the extension of Arizona's seat belt law. Unfortunately, these kinds of reports have neither asked nor answered the right questions.

Proving that people suffer more severe and expensive injuries when they're not wearing seat belts belabors the obvious. No credible opponent of seat belt laws has disputed that seat belts can save wearers from death and injury. To present statistics that never were in doubt as the longawaited evidence fails to deal with the unresolved issue of whether requiring seat belt use is good public policy.

Critics of seat belt laws have contended that they alter driver behavior in ways that increase the hazards for other users of the streets and highways. In particular, some drivers wearing seat belts may feel more assured of surviving an accident, and hence tend to drive more aggressively, thus raising the risk of collisions with other vehicles and pedestrians.

In the early 1970s, a few challenges to the presumed safety benefits of increased auto safety regulations appeared in lightly read academic journals. In a 1970 issue of Applied Economics, L. B. Lave and W. W. Weber suggested that mandated safety devices (seat belts, better bumpers, collapsible steering wheels) might lead to faster driving that could offset the safety gains. In 1975, Sam Peltzman's "The Effects of Automobile Safety Regulations" in the Journal of Political Economy hypothesized that safer autos would lead to more aggressive driving that would endanger other users of the roads.

This earlier research has been mostly ignored or dismissed in favor of adherence to more simplistic research that, unsurprisingly, proves that crashtest dummies suffer more damage without safety devices.

Crash-test dummies, of course, cannot have their driving behavior altered by a perception of greater crash survivability. Consequently, the research with dummies doesn't refute the hypothesis that driver behavior might be changed and thus negate or reduce some of the anticipated safety gains.

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The plausibility of the aggressive driver hypothesis cries out for more research. For example, Hawaii, the state with the most rigorously enforced seat belt law and the highest compliance rate in the nation, has experienced an increase in traffic fatalities and fatality rates since its law went into effect in December 1985.

This is not to say that the seat belts are killing vehicle occupants. Clearly enough crash-test dummies have smashed into enough auto windshields and dashboards to convince all but the most obstinate that wearing a seat belt is probably a good idea. What, then, is going on in Hawaii? Well, we don't know. But the data do not support a smug assurance that forcing people to wear seat belts is without potential undesirable outcomes.

A recent statistical study of states with and without seat belt laws was undertaken by Professor Christopher Garbacz of the University of Missouri-Rolla. This study seems to support the altered driver behavior hypothesis. Dr. Garbacz found that states with seat belt laws saw decreases in traffic fatalities for those covered by the laws (typically drivers and front-seat passengers), but increases in fatalities for rear-seat passengers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Further, the patterns of changes in total traffic fatalities among the states showed no consistent relationship with the existence of a seat belt law in the state.

This suggests a significantly less optimistic interpretation of the impact of seat belt laws than the prevailing orthodoxy would allow. Forcing unwilling motorists to wear seat belts may save their lives and reduce their injuries. Disconcertingly, though, seat belt laws appear to be increasing the hazards for other users of the roads.

Deciding whether this apparent shift in risk is an acceptable cost of a seat belt law is a far different proposition from pretending that there is no significant cost. Policy-makers may be satisfied that the benefits of a seat belt law outweigh the costs. However, a humane public policy demands that those who may ultimately pay the costs be warned of the potential increased risks they face on the streets and highways. To do less is to endanger some of the least protected users of our roads.

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Hawaii Reporter

Freedom to Report Real News

Strapped: Unbuckling Seat Belt Laws

By Ted Balaker, 6/8/2004 2:47:14 AM

Who's the bigger threat to your safety, a murderer or someone who attempts suicide? The answer is obvious, and we'd certainly jeer any mayor who suggested lowering a city's death toll by cracking down on suicides. Yet something strange happens when death comes to the highway. Politicians lock arms with law enforcement, and come up with campaigns like "Click It or Ticket," which began Monday and aims to reduce highway fatalities through stricter seat belt law enforcement. Suddenly, the murder-suicide distinction vanishes, and it's perfectly acceptable to reduce deaths by punishing those who put only themselves at risk.

Like other do-gooder efforts that plead with us to turn off our TVs or put down our cigarettes, Click It or Ticket rolls around once every year (May 24 to June 6). But unlike many other campaigns, CIOT doesn't stop with pleading. Cops from over 12,000 law enforcement agencies scope out violators, set up checkpoints and mete out fines as high as \$200. In order to emphasize the seriousness of their intentions, they've even adopted the hallmark of all ham-fisted safety crusades—zero tolerance. As one police chief put it: "America should be on notice—Click It or Ticket. No exceptions. No excuses. No warnings."

But why waste cops' time with seatbelt laws? After all, laws shouldn't protect careless people from themselves, they should protect the peaceful from the dangerous. CIOT supporters figure that since so many people die because they refuse to wear seatbelts, the government could save many lives by strapping them in with laws. The implicit rationale is that all of last year's 43,220 highway deaths were equally tragic.

But if an adult does something risky—like tightrope walking, smoking or driving without a seatbelt—that person alone is responsible for the consequences. And since drivers who don't buckle up aren't making anyone else less safe, laws that bear down on these people don't make other motorists any safer either. We should be allowed to ruin our own lives, but we shouldn't be allowed to ruin the lives of others. So, yes, it's tragic when someone dies because he refused to wear a seatbelt, but it's much more tragic when a reckless driver kills innocent people. Public policy should not concern itself with decreasing all highway deaths, but with decreasing the deaths of innocents.

Even though fans of individual liberty often (and rightly) decry the paternalism embedded in seatbelt laws, most Americans take little offense at such state-sponsored nannying. However, nannying does not just make us less free; when it distracts law enforcement from its proper role, it can also make us less safe. When government assumes many duties, it's tougher to do the important ones right.

Government officials are more on the mark when they call for enforcement of drunk driving laws. But here again law should focus on recklessness, whether it's encouraged by alcohol, fatigue, general stupidity or high-speed lipstick application.

Forty-nine states have seatbelt laws, and in many cases, the laws allow officers to pull over motorists whose only crime is not wearing a seatbelt. While the officer takes time to give the seatbelt scofflaw a scolding and a ticket, plenty of other drivers embark on the kind of harebrained maneuvering that often ends with a reckless driver colliding into a good driver. It's these red-light-running, left-turn-at-any-cost daredevils who enrage and endanger good drivers.

And seat belt laws come with their own set of unintended consequences, which further complicates the principle that policy should protect the peaceful people from the dangerous. Seat belt laws may make drivers and children safer, but economists such as Christopher Garbacz suggest that greater safety can make drivers more comfortable with dangerous driving, which puts the lives of more innocents -- like pedestrians, cyclists and other passengers -- in jeopardy. Risk assessment researchers have long pondered this paradox, and some have even suggested (only half jokingly) that the best way to promote cautious driving would be to attach a twelve-inch buck knife to all steering wheels.

Of course, the government's crusade to convert the unbuckled does not stop with seatbelt laws. For decades, mandates have forced automakers to take up the cause. At one point, interlocks actually prevented drivers from starting their cars if their seatbelts weren't snapped on. Public outrage spurred Congress to outlaw such mandates, but the crusade continued.

Today government-mandated lights, chimes and text messages hector drivers when they turn the ignition, and often all the ringing and flashing doesn't stop when the car starts. In many models, chime and light seatbelt reminders can persist for up to five minutes, and safety pushers have even decided to take another stab at interlocks. A proposal before Congress would up the agitation ante by mandating "entertainment interlocks," where drivers could listen to the stereo only if they buckled up.

The good news is that most of us do buckle up. About 80 percent of Americans use seatbelts, a decision probably based less on government nagging than on a simple understanding of the safety benefits. After all, the word is out—seatbelts make you safer. We get it. Why wage an ever-intensifying campaign against the remaining holdouts?

Perhaps one day regulators will understand that -- even when armed with all the facts -- some people will still choose risky behavior. Instead of saving us from ourselves, regulators should take a deep breath, allow beltless motorists to put themselves at risk, and go hassle the dangerous drivers.

Ted Balaker is the Jacobs Fellow at the Reason Public Policy Institute, where he often addresses transportation issues. He recently completed a study on urban rail in North Carolina.

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Government Watch...

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Health Statistics > Number of Abortions by state

Rank	States	Amount (top to bottom)
#1	<u>New York:</u>	127,102
#2	<u>Florida:</u>	85,589
#3	<u>Texas:</u>	77,409
#4	<u>Illinois:</u>	46,546
#5	<u>Ohio:</u>	37,464
#6	<u>Pennsylvania:</u>	36,820
#7	<u>Georgia:</u>	33,248
#8	<u>North Carolina:</u>	30,419
#9	<u>Michigan:</u>	28,220
#10	<u>Massachusetts:</u>	26,293
#11	<u>Washington:</u>	25,620
#12	<u>Virginia:</u>	24,586
#13	<u>Tennessee:</u>	17,405
#14	<u>Minnesota:</u>	14,832
#15	<u>Oregon:</u>	14,272
#16	<u>Alabama:</u>	13,382
#17	<u>Connecticut:</u>	13,265
#18	<u>Kansas:</u>	12,284
#19	<u>Indiana:</u>	11,875
#20	<u>Louisiana:</u>	10,932
#21	<u>Nevada:</u>	10,110
#22	<u>Arizona:</u>	8,302
#23	<u>Missouri:</u>	7,797
#24	<u>Oklahoma:</u>	7,038
#25	<u>South Carolina:</u>	7,014
#26	<u>Arkansas:</u>	5,924
#27	<u>Rhode Island:</u>	5,455
#28	<u>District of Columbia:</u>	5,385
#29	<u>New Mexico:</u>	5,166
#30	<u>Colorado:</u>	4,633
#31	<u>Hawaii:</u>	3,999
#32	<u>Nebraska:</u>	3,982
#33	<u>Kentucky:</u>	3,764
#34	<u>Utah:</u>	3,594
#35	<u>Mississippi:</u>	3,566
#36	<u>Maine:</u>	2,515
#37	<u>Montana:</u>	2,350

#38	<u>West Virginia:</u>	2,332
#39	<u>Vermont:</u>	1,519
#40	<u>North Dakota:</u>	1,216
#41	<u>South Dakota:</u>	895
#42	<u>Idaho:</u>	738
#43	<u>Wyoming:</u>	4
	Weighted average:	18,252.6

DEFINITION: Number of Reported Legal Abortions by State of Occurrence, 2001 - 784,861 Abortions for 2001.

SOURCE: statehealthfacts.org via StateMaster

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