



**ADVOCATES  
FOR HIGHWAY  
AND AUTO SAFETY**

**FACT SHEET**

**STANDARD  
ENFORCEMENT  
SAFETY BELT LAWS**

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In 2005, 55% of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were not wearing seat belts. Seat belt use, reinforced by effective safety belt laws, is a proven lifesaver.

All states except one have seat belt use laws, but only 25 states (AK, AL, CA, CT, DE, GA, HI, IL, IN, IA, KY, LA, MD, MI, MS, NJ, NM, NY, NC, OK, OR, SC, TN, TX, WA) and the District of Columbia have primary enforcement of their belt laws. In states with primary enforcement, law officers may ticket a non-belt user when they see a violation of the seat belt law. With secondary enforcement laws, officers may issue a citation only after stopping the vehicle for another traffic infraction.

Seat belt use is significantly higher in states with primary enforcement laws compared to those with secondary enforcement laws. Primary enforcement is important not only for raising adult safety belt use, but also for increasing the number of children who are protected by occupant restraints. Research also shows that when adults buckle up, 87% of children get buckled up too.

**SEAT BELT FACTS**

- Lap-shoulder belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat occupants by 45% and the risk of moderate-to-critical injuries by 50%, depending on the type of vehicle and seating position involved. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 60% and moderate-to-critical injury by 65%. (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, or NHTSA, 2005)
- Seat belts are credited with preventing an estimated 15,434 fatalities in 2004. If all passenger vehicle occupants over age 4 wore safety belts, 21,273 lives could have been saved in 2004. (NHTSA, 2005)
- If all passengers were to wear their seat belts, an additional 5,839 fatalities could have been prevented in 2004. (NHTSA, 2005)
- Six out of ten children who died in passenger vehicle crashes were unbelted. (NHTSA, 2005)
- The needless deaths and injuries that result from non-use of seat belts cost society an estimated \$26 billion annually in medical care, lost productivity and other injury related costs. (NHTSA, 2002)
- Average inpatient costs for traffic crash victims who did not use seat belts were 50% higher than for victims who were belted. (NSC, 2001)

## PRIMARY ENFORCEMENT LAW FACTS

- By just enacting a primary enforcement seat belt law, usage rates rise 10-15 percentage points. (NHTSA, 2003)
- Michigan saw a 14 percent increase in their seat belt use rate from 70 percent to 84 percent after they passed a primary enforcement law in 2000. (NHTSA, 2003)
- When California passed a primary enforcement law in 1993, usage rates rose from 70% to 82%. Similar impacts occurred in Louisiana, where usage rose 18 points, Georgia, where usage rose 17 points, in Maryland, where usage rose 13 points and in the District of Columbia, where usage rose 24 points when a primary enforcement law was combined with penalty points. (NHTSA, 2002)
- In New York, prior to its primary enforcement law of 1984, the seat belt usage rate was 11%. By Fall of 1999, 76% of motorists buckled up. (NHTSA, 2001)
- When Louisiana adopted its primary enforcement law, child restraint use jumped from 45 to 82% even though the state's child passenger safety law did not change. (NHTSA, 2002)
- African American men are less likely to buckle up than their white and Hispanic counterparts, putting them at greater risk of dying in a crash. (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) However, research shows that for African American men age 18-29, belt use is significantly higher in primary enforcement states than in secondary law states, 58% v. 46%. (American Journal of Public Health, Vol. 88, No. 2, Feb. 1998)
- The Congressional Black Caucus has stated that increasing seat belt use among African Americans is an "urgent national health priority." The National Black Caucus of State Legislators and the National Conference of Black Mayors have also expressed support for strong laws that increase seat belt use and include safeguards for uniform enforcement. (NHTSA, 2003)
- Fines for not wearing a seat belt in the United States currently range from \$5 in Idaho to \$75 in Oregon. The most common fine (27 states) is \$20-25. A 1995 NHTSA study of the effect of various provisions of seat belt use laws found that for each \$1 in fine level, states tend to gain about 0.08% higher belt use. (NHTSA, 2003)
- In 2004, 68 percent of the pickup truck drivers killed in traffic crashes were not using restraints.

*August 2006*