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No seat belts in 42% of fatal police car crashes

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By Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY

At least 42% of police officers killed in vehicle crashes over the past three decades were not wearing seat belts or other safety restraints, according to a federal review.

The study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which analyzed 733 crashes from 1980 through 2008, comes less than a week after a separate report found that fatal traffic incidents in 2010 were the leading cause of officer deaths for the 13th straight year.

"This points to a real problem," says Craig Floyd, chairman of the Washington, D.C.-based National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund, which closely tracks officer deaths.

Some officers resist wearing seat belts because the restraints slow their movement in and out of the cars, Floyd says. Others complain that the straps get tangled in utility and gun belts.

The memorial fund reported a 37% overall increase in line of duty deaths in 2010, reversing two consecutive years of decline. Included in that number, traffic-related fatalities jumped from 51 in 2009 to 73 in 2010.

Floyd says he has talked informally with police officials about seeking guidance from sources such as NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) to improve officer safety on the road.

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Of the officers killed in vehicle crashes, 28% used some kind of restraint in the 1980s, according to

the NHTSA report. Usage increased to 56% in the 1990s. But the report found that seat belt or other restraint use has recently declined to about 50%.

According to the NHTSA report, fatal vehicle accidents involving officers have been steadily rising, from 29% of the total fatalities in the 1980s to 50% or more in recent years.

In addition to the 42% who were not wearing restraints during the course of the review, the study found that seat-belt use could not be determined in nearly 13% of the fatalities, suggesting that non-compliance could be higher.

In Las Vegas, the loss of three officers in vehicle crashes in 2009 — all not wearing seat belts at the times of the crashes — launched an internal campaign to compel officers to comply with the law.

Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department spokesman Jacinto Rivera says the officer deaths "shook the foundation of this agency."

Rivera says the accidents required a "cultural change" within the department, prompting Sheriff Doug Gillespie to initiate a number of programs:

•Police crash survivors were recruited to film public service messages.

•A training panel was formed to study how to improve driving safety. Rivera says the panel looked at how transportation businesses, including UPS, trained personnel.

•Officers are encouraged to report on colleagues who don't comply. Punishments range from citations to suspension.