Traffic Safety Facts Traffic Tech – Technology Transfer Series

Number 317

September 2006

www.nhtsa.go

Primary Enforcement Saves Lives: The Case for Upgrading Secondary Safety Belt Laws

Safety belts save lives. In 2005, safety belts prevented 15,700 fatalities, 350,000 serious injuries, and \$67 billion in economic costs associated with traffic injuries and deaths. At 82 percent, the 2005 national safety belt use rate increased 2 percentage points from 2004. Research has shown that for every percentage point increase in safety belt use, approximately 268 lives are saved.

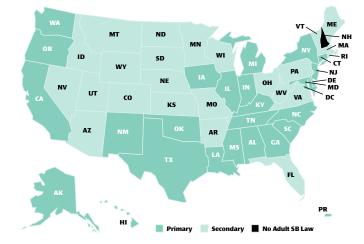
The Case for Primary Enforcement

Primary safety belt laws have a proven track record of increasing a State's safety belt use rate. In 2005, the average safety belt use rate in primary enforcement States was 85 percent, 10 percentage points higher than belt use in States without primary enforcement laws – 75 percent. When States upgrade their laws from secondary to primary, significant increases in safety belt use also occur. For example, when Illinois upgraded its secondary belt laws to primary in 2003, belt use rose from 74 percent in 2002 to 80 percent.

As of September 2006, 25 States plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have passed primary belt laws (see map). While belt use has increased in some states without a primary safety belt use law, the greatest gains are witnessed when a primary law is enacted in conjunction with enforcement, education, and partnership initiatives. Passing primary safety belt use laws in every State would save thousands of lives and prevent tens of thousands of injuries each year.

States now have a greater incentive for passing primary laws. Under Section 2005 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA-LU), almost \$500 million in grant funds are available in FY 2006-2009 for all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the four territories if they qualify under one of the three guidelines: (1) New Primary Law State: Enacts and enforces a conforming primary safety belt use law on or after January 1, 2003; (2) Pre-2003 Primary Law State: Primary Law in effect on or before December 31, 2002; (3) Safety Belt Performance State: Achieves a safety belt use rate of 85 percent or higher without a primary safety belt law in two consecutive calendar years beginning after December 31, 2005.

State Safety Belt Use Laws (as of September 2006)



Long-Term Benefits of Upgrading to Primary Law

Over the long term, primary safety belt use laws benefit everyone. States with primary safety belt laws not only have higher belt use rates, they have lower fatality rates. From 2000 to 2004, there were smaller percentages of unrestrained passenger vehicle occupant fatalities in primary enforcement States (51% compared to 65%). Additionally, in primary enforcement States, the passenger vehicle occupant fatality rates were 1.03 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled and 10.69 per 100,000 population. For all other States the rates were 1.21 and 13.13, respectively.

A recent study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimated the number of lives that could have been saved had the remaining secondary law States converted to a primary law. The study reported that approximately 5,390 lives could have been saved (see table, next page).

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Secondary Belt Law States	Passenger vehicle driver deaths 1996-2003	Lives that could have been saved since 1996
*Alaska	326	23
Arizona	3,347	234
Arkansas	2,914	204
Colorado	2,646	185
Florida	10,889	761
Idaho	1,158	81
Kansas	2,373	166
*Kentucky	4,027	282
Maine	838	59
Massachusetts	1,776	124
Minnesota	2,771	194
*Mississippi	4,314	302
Missouri	5,459	382
Montana	1,070	75
Nebraska	1,345	94
Nevada	1,226	89
North Dakota	465	33
Ohio	6,309	441
Pennsylvania	6,644	465
Rhode Island	336	23
*South Carolina	4,436	310
South Dakota	699	49
Utah	1,216	85
Vermont	372	26
Virginia	4,200	294
West Virginia	1,759	123
Wisconsin	3,454	242
Wyoming	675	47
TOTAL	77,084	5,390

Effects of Strengthening Belt Laws (since 1996)

* Alaska, Kentucky, Mississippi, and South Carolina now have primary laws.

The national safety belt use rate can also reduce the economic costs associated with crashes. Increasing the 2005 national belt use rate from 82 percent to 90 percent would save approximately \$7.2 billion annually due to reduced productivity losses, property damage, medical costs, rehabilitation costs, legal and court costs, emergency services costs, insurance administration costs, funeral costs, traffic delay, and costs to employers.

Public Support for Safety Belt Use Laws

In 2003, NHTSA surveyed approximately 6,000 people 16 and older in the U.S. to determine attitudes, knowledge, and experience with safety belt laws and their enforcement. Ninety-five percent of the public agreed with the statement, "If I were in an accident, I would want to have my seat belt on." The vast majority of the public (88%) also favored safety belt laws for front seat occupants.

Responding to Objections to Primary Belt Laws

While primary enforcement saves lives, saves money, and prevents injuries, some still oppose it. If people do not know the facts, politically sensitive issues, such as infringement of individual rights and harassment, may become obstacles in passing primary laws. Thus, it is important that State and local law enforcement leaders provide public assurances that belt use laws will be enforced uniformly in all segments of the population. More specifically, they should be encouraged to review and reaffirm their departmental policies and training programs to ensure people's rights are not violated. All steps should be taken to educate the public that enforcement leaders take these issues seriously and have policies and procedures in place to address it.

Primary Enforcement Saves Lives: The Case for Upgrading Secondary Safety Belt Laws presents the overwhelming evidence that safety belt use saves lives, reduces injuries, and reduces economic costs associated with motor vehicle crashes. The booklet can be distributed to garner support, to develop speeches, make presentations, to write fact sheets, and to write news releases.

How to Order

To order *Primary Enforcement Saves Lives: The Case for Upgrading Secondary Safety Belt Laws* (58 pages), write to the Office of Occupant Protection, NHTSA, NTI-110, 400 Seventh Street SW., Washington, DC 20590, fax 202-366-7096, or download from **www.nhtsa.dot.gov**. Jennifer Warren, MPH was the Contracting Officer's Technical Representative for this project.



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