



SURVEY FINDS THAT SOME PEOPLE FORGET TO WEAR THEIR SEAT BELTS

Between November 1996 and January 1997, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducted a national telephone survey of the public who were age 16 and older. Volume III in a series of reports from this survey summarizes findings related to seat belt issues. NHTSA distributed Volumes I (Methodology) and II (Air Bag Report) earlier this year (*TRAFFIC TECH* 165). Future reports in the series will discuss child safety seats, emergency medical services, and crash injury experience.

What People Say About Seat Belt Use

Three-fourths (76 percent) of drivers said that they used their seat belts *all of the time* when driving.

When questioned further, however, almost 10 percent of these drivers also said that they did not wear their seat belt at least once in the past week while driving. Among those who considered themselves *most of the time* seat belt users (who made up 12 percent of all drivers), almost 70 percent said that they did not buckle up at some time in the past week.

Thus a substantial segment of drivers viewed themselves as regular seat belt users, but admitted that they do not always wear their belts. They outnumbered drivers who said that they *sometimes* (6 percent), *rarely* (3 percent), or *never* (3 percent) wear their seat belts.

Reasons For Seat Belt Use

Drivers gave multiple reasons why they wore their seat belts. The reasons they gave most often included: wanting to avoid injury (95 percent), wearing a seat belt is a habit (81 percent), because it was the law (78 percent), they wanted to avoid getting a ticket (64 percent), and because they felt uncomfortable not wearing the belt (56 percent). When asked which was the one most important reason why they wore their seat belts, more than two-thirds of drivers (68 percent) said that they chose to wear their belt to avoid being injured in a vehicle crash.

Reasons for Not Using Seat Belts

The reasons drivers gave most often for not using their seat belts included that they were only going a short distance (56 percent), they forgot to put the belt on (53 percent), they were in a hurry (41 percent), and that the seat belt was uncomfortable (33 percent). Almost one-half of drivers considered short distance (24 percent) or forgetting (23 percent) to be the most important reason for their nonuse of seat belts.

Discomfort ranked a distant third at 10 percent. However, 38 percent of drivers said there were things they disliked or found annoying about wearing seat belts. This was more often true for females (44 percent)

Almost ten percent of drivers who say they wear their seat belts all the time, admitted that they drove without wearing it at least once in the past week.

Top 5 Reasons Most Often Given for Wearing Seat Belts

1. To avoid injury
2. It's a habit
3. It's the law
4. To avoid a ticket
5. Feel uncomfortable without it

Top 4 Reasons Most Often Given for NOT Wearing Seat Belts

1. Only going a short distance
2. Forgot to put it on
3. In a hurry
4. The belt was uncomfortable



than males (32 percent), who often complained about the belt cutting or pressing across their neck.

Attitudes About Seat Belt Laws And Enforcement

Sixty-three percent of the public age 16 and older favored laws requiring drivers and front seat passengers to wear seat belts *a lot*; another 23 percent favored those laws *some*. Three-fourths of those who supported the front seat laws believed that seat belt laws should apply to adult passengers riding in the back seat as well.

Most persons (94 percent) were aware that there was a seat belt law in their state. However, the public was less knowledgeable about components of their state law, such as whether it allowed primary or secondary enforcement. Under primary enforcement or standard laws, police can stop a vehicle whenever they see a seat belt violation. Under secondary enforcement laws, police must stop the vehicle for another violation first.

In primary law states, 74 percent of persons who thought their state had a belt law assumed it allowed primary enforcement. In secondary law states, 40 percent of persons who reported having a belt law assumed it permitted primary enforcement and another 15 percent were not sure.

A majority of the public preferred primary enforcement (52 percent) to secondary enforcement laws (45 percent). The percentage who favored

primary enforcement was higher in states with primary laws (65 percent) compared to states with secondary laws (46 percent). In general, people's attitudes tended to conform with what they thought the law in their state specified. Sixty-eight percent of those who thought their state law allowed primary enforcement preferred primary enforcement. Sixty-seven percent of those who thought their law called for secondary enforcement preferred secondary enforcement.

Those who said they did not support primary laws were asked why seat belt laws should differ from other types of traffic infractions (which are primary or standard laws). Most often, they said it was because they believed seat belt use should be a personal choice (31 percent), that nonuse does not pose a risk to others (19 percent), and that they do not consider it a serious violation (19 percent). Far fewer (4 percent) gave as their reason that police may abuse their authority.

HOW TO ORDER

Limited copies of **1996 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey -- Volume III Seat Belt Report** (118 pages), prepared by Schulman, Ronca, & Bucuvalas, Inc. are available by writing to the Office of Research and Traffic Records, NHTSA, NTS-31, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590, or send a fax to (202) 366-7096. Alan Block was the contract manager of this project, email: ablock@nhtsa.dot.gov

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