

Log # H-570A



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: JUL - 1 1997

In reply refer to: H-97-24 and -25

To the American Society of Newspaper Editors,
the National Newspaper Association, and
the Newspaper Association of America
(see attached mailing list)

The National Transportation Safety Board recently held a public forum to discuss concerns related to the role of air bags in passenger vehicles, to identify who is vulnerable to injuries, to examine the experience with air bags in other countries, and to address ways to increase seatbelt and child restraint use.¹ The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) participated in the forum, along with representatives from Australia, Canada, and Europe; the automobile industry; air bag suppliers, insurance, safety, and consumer groups; and family members involved in crashes where air bags deployed. Based on testimony given at the forum, the Board believes that your organization can play a positive role in saving lives of the Nation's citizens, particularly children.

In severe frontal crashes, air bags clearly increase the chances of survival, particularly for unbelted adult drivers. The protection afforded by air bags, however, does not extend equally to all passenger vehicle occupants. Between 1993 and 1996, 38 children died because they were struck by an air bag in what would have otherwise been a survivable crash, and 23 adults were also killed by their air bags in crashes they should have survived.²

Several points became evident during the forum. The "one-size-fits-all" approach to air bag design is obsolete: air bags need to be designed to protect all people in a variety of crash situations. With regard to passenger vehicles on the road today, children need to be in the back seat, and everyone needs to be buckled up and seated as far back as possible from the air bag. NHTSA needs to move quickly on a decision regarding air bag deactivation. NHTSA's databases of crash information precludes proper evaluation of the effectiveness of air bags because the information is not comprehensive in one database and is insufficient in the other. Finally and perhaps most importantly, societal attitudes must change with regard to seatbelt use. The United States remains far behind other countries in seatbelt use, and the Nation pays a high price for it in terms of lives lost. Elected officials need to take responsibility for tough enforcement programs and to consider financial incentives (or penalties) if the Nation is to increase seatbelt use.

¹ National Transportation Safety Board. 1997. Proceedings of the National Transportation Safety Board public forum on air bags and child passenger safety; March 17-20, 1997; Washington, D.C. Report of Proceedings NTSB/RP-97/01; PB97-917001.

² National Transportation Safety Board. 1996. The performance and use of child restraint systems, seatbelts, and air bags for children in passenger vehicles. Safety Study NTSB/SS-96/01. Washington, D.C.

The Safety Board's concerns about motor vehicle occupant protection have led it to examine and recommend action on a wide range of safety issues throughout its 30-year history. Important changes have already occurred, including improved designs of seatbelts and child restraint systems, the required installation of lap/shoulder belts at all outboard seating positions, the mandated use of child restraint systems in all 50 States and seatbelts in 49 States, an increase in public education about the importance of restraint use, and increased child restraint and seatbelt use rates. Additional improvements, however, are still needed.

The use of seatbelts and child restraint systems is the most effective means of reducing traffic fatalities and serious injuries. About 40 percent of the children who are younger than 5 years and involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained, almost half of all children 5 to 9 years old and involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained, and about 40 percent of front seat occupants involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained.³ Not only are these occupants at risk of being seriously injured or killed in a crash, but they are also, for the most part, violating the traffic laws. Reporting when seatbelts and child restraints are not used in passenger vehicle crashes, especially when injuries occur, would help to educate the public about the types of injuries that result when passenger vehicle occupants are unrestrained in crashes and thus would contribute to reinforce government and industry efforts to increase the number of people who use seatbelts and child restraint systems.

Strong State laws and strict enforcement of those laws are the most important components of a comprehensive program to increase the proper use of child restraints and seatbelts. In addition, the print media and the entertainment industry play essential roles in helping to bring about positive changes in societal attitudes and behavior. For example, newspaper articles of passenger vehicle crashes that report the use or nonuse of seatbelts and child restraints, especially when injuries occur, help educate the public about the types of injuries that result when passenger vehicle occupants are unrestrained in crashes. Newspapers cartoons, comic strips, and advertisements that depict adults wearing seatbelts properly and children in the back seat of passenger vehicles in size-appropriate child restraint systems present positive images and reinforce the importance of buckling up.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), the National Newspaper Association (NNA), and the Newspaper Association of America (NAA) represent the majority of daily and nondaily newspapers that are read or seen by the American public.⁴ The Safety Board

³ Data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) maintained by the U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

⁴ The more than 850 members of ASNE are responsible for editorial and news policies of daily newspapers in the United States and Canada. The NNA represents more than 4,000 U.S. community newspapers that range in size from small town weeklies to large daily editions. The NAA membership includes the American Newspaper Publishers Association (founded in 1887), the Newspaper Advertising Bureau, the Association of Newspaper Classified Advertising Managers, the International Circulation Managers Association, the International Newspapers Advertising and Marketing Executives, the Newspaper Advertising Co-Op Network, and the Newspaper Research Council. Educators, university newspapers, press associations, and suppliers/vendors are also members. These NAA member groups account for nearly 90 percent of the daily circulation in the United States and a wide range of non-daily U.S. newspapers.

believes that the ASNE, the NNA, and the NAA should encourage their memberships to report in news articles about passenger vehicle crashes information on the use of seatbelts and child restraints and the injury severity that results when seatbelts and child restraints are not used. The Safety Board further believes that these organizations should encourage their memberships to require that advertisers show adults wearing seatbelts properly and children in the back seat of passenger vehicles in size-appropriate child restraint systems. The Safety Board has also asked the Motion Picture Association of America, the Entertainment Industries Council, the Academy of Televisions Arts and Sciences, and the National Cartoonists Society to portray adults wearing seatbelts properly and children in the back seat of passenger vehicles in size-appropriate child restraint systems unless obviously identified or depicted as high risk behavior.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the National Newspaper Association, and the Newspaper Association of America:

Encourage your membership to report in news articles about passenger vehicle crashes information on the use of seatbelts and child restraints and the injury severity that results when seatbelts and child restraints are not used. (H-97-24)

Encourage your membership to require that advertisers show adults wearing seatbelts properly and children in the back seat of passenger vehicles in size-appropriate child restraint systems. (H-97-25)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "...to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-97-24 and -25 in your reply.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations

By: 
Jim Hall
Chairman

News Associations

Lee Stinnett
Executive Director
American Society of Newspaper Editors
11690B Sunrise Valley Drive
Reston, Virginia 20191

Mr. Roy J. Eaton
Chairman
National Newspaper Association
1525 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 550
Arlington, Virginia 22209

Mr. David Cox
Newspaper Association of America
1921 Gallows Road
Suite 600
Vienna, Virginia 22182