



Safety Belts and Hispanics – 2003 Report

Since 1990, the Hispanic population in the United States has increased by nearly 60 percent.¹ As the Hispanic population continues to grow, the low safety belt use rate by Hispanics is emerging as a significant public health issue. Clearly, expanded efforts are needed to increase safety belt use within the Hispanic community.

Hispanics Are At Risk

- Because the Hispanic population is increasing, a greater proportion of future crash injuries and fatalities will come from the Hispanic community. Hispanics currently make up 13 percent of the U.S. population and are projected to make up 24 percent by 2050.
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for Hispanics from 1-34 years of age, and are the sixth leading cause of death for Hispanics of all ages.² Convincing Hispanics to increase their use of safety belts will help reverse this trend.
- A recent medical study showed that Hispanic drivers have lower safety belt use rates than non-Hispanic whites, with correspondingly higher fatality rates in traffic crashes.³
- Another recent medical study examined motor vehicle fatality exposure rates and found that, although Hispanic and black male teenagers travel fewer vehicle miles than their white counterparts, they are nearly twice as likely to die in a motor vehicle crash.⁴

Safety Belt Use Saves Lives and Dollars

- Safety belts saved more than 13,000 American lives in 2001. However, during this same year, nearly two-thirds (60 percent) of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were unrestrained.⁵
- Research has shown that lap/shoulder belts, when used properly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 60 percent and moderate-to-critical injury by 65 percent.⁶
- Safety belts should always be worn, even when riding in vehicles equipped with air bags. Air bags are designed to work *with* safety belts, not by themselves. Air bags, by themselves, have a fatality-reducing effectiveness of only 12 percent.⁷
- Safety belt use saves society an estimated \$50 billion annually in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury related costs.⁸
- Conversely, safety belt *non use* results in significant economic costs to society. The needless deaths and injuries from safety belt non use result in an estimated \$26 billion in economic costs to society annually.⁹ The cost of unbuckled drivers and passengers goes far beyond those killed and the loss to their families. We all pay—in higher taxes and higher health care and insurance costs.

Child Safety Seats/Booster Seats Help Protect Children

- In 2001, there were 497 passenger vehicle occupant fatalities among children under five years of age in the United States. Of these 497 child fatalities, 242 children (or 49 percent) were unrestrained.¹⁰
- Research on the effectiveness of child safety seats has found them to reduce fatal injury for infants (less than 1 year old) by 71 percent and toddlers (1-4 years old) by 54 percent in passenger cars. For infants and toddlers in light trucks, the corresponding reductions are 58 and 59 percent, respectively.

The Facts
To Buckle Up America





The Facts To Buckle Up America



- All children who have outgrown child safety seats should be properly restrained in booster seats until they are at least 8 years old, unless they are 4'9" tall. Children are large enough for a lap and shoulder belt when they can sit against the vehicle seat back cushion with their knees bent over the vehicle seat cushion.
- To avoid injuries from air bags, children 12 years of age and younger should be appropriately restrained in the back seat. However, a recent survey showed that 42 percent of minority children (which included Hispanics) were at greater risk of air bag-related injuries because they were more frequently placed in the front seat of vehicles with front passenger air bags. By comparison, 15 percent of white children were improperly placed in the front seat of these vehicles.¹¹
- Adult safety belt use is an important predictor of restraint use among children. Observations conducted in 2002 showed that if a driver is wearing a safety belt, young children were also restrained 92 percent of the time; however, if a driver is not wearing a safety belt, young children were restrained only 72 percent of the time.¹²

Strong Laws Can Make a Difference

- There are two types of safety belt laws: primary and secondary. Primary (standard) enforcement allows a law enforcement officer to stop a vehicle and issue a citation when the officer simply observes an unbelted driver or passenger. Secondary enforcement means that a citation for not wearing a safety belt can only be written after the officer stops the vehicle or cites the offender for another infraction.
- Primary safety belt laws have a proven track record of increasing safety belt use. Primary safety belt laws are much more effective than secondary laws, because people are more likely to buckle up and place their children in child safety seats when there is the perceived risk of receiving a citation for not doing so.
- In June 2002, the average safety belt use rate in States with primary enforcement laws was 11 percentage points higher than in States without primary enforcement laws.¹³ (Safety belt use was 80 percent in primary law States versus 69 percent in States without primary enforcement.)
- Primary safety belt laws are effective in increasing safety belt use among Hispanics. Several studies have shown that safety belt use among Hispanics is significantly higher in primary enforcement areas compared with that of secondary enforcement areas.^{14, 15} Higher safety belt use translates into lives saved and injuries prevented.
- In a recent National survey, 92 percent of Hispanics expressed support for laws requiring front seat passengers to wear safety belts and 72 percent of Hispanics expressed support for primary safety belt laws.¹⁶

Differential Enforcement

- The issue of a law enforcement officer stopping a citizen based purely on race or ethnicity, known as differential enforcement or “racial profiling,” has recently become an issue in traffic safety. While NHTSA supports the enactment of primary safety belt laws among the States, NHTSA strongly opposes any form of enforcement that uses race or ethnicity as a criterion for stopping a motorist. NHTSA continues to work with the Department of Justice to develop and promote best practices for conducting fair, professional traffic stops.
- NHTSA also continues to work with its State and community public safety partners to ensure that traffic stops are made for legitimate law violations. NHTSA encourages law enforcement agencies to adopt policies, management practices, training, and community outreach efforts to eliminate differential enforcement.



The Facts To Buckle Up America



- When three States—Louisiana, California, and Georgia—upgraded their laws to primary enforcement statutes, minority groups thought their chances of getting a safety belt ticket would be higher than for whites. As a result, their recorded increases in safety belt use were disproportionately greater than the recorded increases for whites. However, research conducted in several localities in Louisiana and Georgia showed no changes in ticketing patterns by race that would suggest minority groups received a greater proportion of tickets as a result of primary laws being enacted and enforced. Independent of race or ethnicity, younger drivers, males, and those who drove more than 15,000 miles a year, received the greatest number of tickets.^{17, 18, 19} Similar findings also occurred when Maryland, Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia upgraded their laws from secondary to primary enforcement. After the upgrades, citation data showed that there was either no difference in non-white versus white ticketing, comparing secondary to primary enforcement, or a greater increase in ticketing went to whites following the change to a primary enforcement law.²⁰
- Many States have conducted State-wide Click It or Ticket campaigns to increase safety belt use among all motorists. Hispanics, like many other motorists, have experienced safety benefits from these campaigns. Florida and North Carolina collected data on Hispanic safety belt use during Click It or Ticket campaigns conducted in those States during May 2001. In both States, the Hispanic safety belt use rate improved most compared to white and non-white occupants. In North Carolina, safety belt use among Hispanics increased from 79 percent to 85 percent. In Florida, the impact of the Click It or Ticket campaign was even more significant: safety belt use among Hispanics increased from 52 percent to 72 percent – a 20 percentage-point increase. In both States, the Hispanic safety belt use rate was lower compared to white occupants at the beginning of the Click It or Ticket campaign, but by the height of enforcement, the Hispanic belt use rate equaled that of white occupants in Florida (72 percent) and was actually one percentage point higher in North Carolina (85 percent versus 84 percent).²¹

Hispanic Organizations Show Strong Support For Safety Belt Laws

- Many Hispanic organizations have partnered with NHTSA to help increase the safety belt and child safety seat use among Hispanics because they know that doing so will save lives and prevent injuries in the Hispanic community. Such organizations include:
 - ASPIRA Association, Inc.
 - Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association
 - Latino Council on Alcohol and Tobacco
 - National Association of Hispanic Nurses
 - National Hispanic Medical Association
 - National Council of La Raza
 - National Latino Children's Institute
 - National SAFE KIDS Campaign²²



References

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- 3 *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, December 2000; 36(6):589-596.
- 4 Baker SP, Braver ER, Chen L, Pantula JF, Massie D. Motor Vehicle Occupant Deaths Among Hispanic and Black Children and Teenagers. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*. 1998;152:1209-1212.
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- 6 Motor Vehicle Traffic Crash Fatality and Injury Estimates for 2000, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, November 2001.
- 7 Traffic Safety Facts, 2000, Occupant Protection, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, DOT HS 809 327.
- 8 The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2000. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, DOT HS 809 446, p. 55.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Traffic Safety Facts 2001, Children, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, DOT HS 809 471, p. 4.
- 11 Survey conducted by Public Opinion Strategies for the Air Bag & Seat Belt Safety Campaign, March 1998.
- 12 National Occupant Protection Use Survey, 2002. Controlled Intersection Study, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- 13 Data accessed from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration web site at <http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/Rpts/2002/809-500ppt.pdf> on February 21, 2003.
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- 17 Ulmer, R.G., Preusser, C.W., Preusser, D.F. *Evaluation of Georgia's Safety Belt Law Change to Primary Enforcement*. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in progress.
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- 20 *Evaluation of Maryland, Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia's Seat Belt Law Change to Primary Enforcement*, Final Report. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, DOT HS 809 213, March 2001. DOT HS 808 866, Revised November 2001.
- 21 Evaluation of NHTSA's Region IV Click It or Ticket Campaign, May 2001. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, January 2002. DOT HS 809 404, pp. 12-13.
- 22 While not a Hispanic organization, the National SAFE KIDS Campaign has programs designed to reach the Hispanic community.

