The Facts
To Buckle Up America

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Safety Belts and Older Teens–2005 Report

Teens* have higher fatality and injury rates in motor vehicle crashes than any other age group.[1] This may be attributable to both driving inexperience and a greater propensity for risk taking behaviors. For instance, while teens are learning the new skills needed for driving, many frequently engage in high-risk behaviors such as speeding and/or driving after using alcohol or other drugs, and not wearing their safety belts. Studies also have shown teens are easily distracted while driving, especially by other teen passengers.[2, 3] Safety belt use is one of the most effective measures to decrease injuries and deaths in a crash; unfortunately, teens are less likely to be buckled up than any other age group.[4]

Teens Are At Risk

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teens in the United States.[5]
- In 2003, 5,240 teens were killed in passenger-vehicle crashes, and 458,000 teens were injured.[6]
- Sixty-three percent of the fatally injured 16-to-20-year-old passenger vehicle occupants were *unrestrained*, compared to 55 percent for adults 21 or older.[7]
- In 2003, the fatality rate (per 100,000 population) in motor vehicle crashes for 16-to-20-year-olds was more than twice the rate than for all other ages combined (25.7 versus 11.4 respectively).[8]
- From 1997 to 2003, the fatality rate (per 100,000 population) in motor vehicle crashes for 16-to-20-year-olds was approximately seven times the rate for 8-to-15-year-olds.[9]
- Drivers are less likely to use restraints when they have been drinking. In 2003, 65 percent of the young drivers (15 to 20 years old) of passenger vehicles involved in fatal crashes who had been drinking were unrestrained. Of the young drivers who had been drinking and were killed in crashes, 74 percent were unrestrained.[10]
- During 2003, a teen died in a traffic crash an average of once every hour on weekends (weekends are defined as 6 p.m. Friday through 5:59 a.m. Monday) and nearly once every two hours during the week.[11]
- In 2003, 34 percent (1,782) of fatally injured teens were completely or partially ejected from a passenger vehicle, compared with 27 percent of those fatally injured for all ages combined.[12]
- Male teens are less likely to wear safety belts than female teens. In 2003, a greater number of males (7.7 percent) reported they were likely to rarely or never use safety belts when driving compared with females (2.8 percent). More males (26.4 percent) than females (23.6 percent) also reported that they had not worn their safety belts within the past week.[13]
- A recent medical study examined motor vehicle fatality exposure rates and found the rate at which African American and Hispanic male teenagers (13 to 19 years old) are fatally injured in a motor vehicle crash is nearly twice as high as the comparable rate for white male teenagers.[14]

* For the purposes of this fact sheet, the term "teen" refers to young people ages 16-20 unless otherwise specified.

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Safety Belts Save Lives and Dollars

- In 2003, safety belts saved society an estimated $63 billion in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury-related costs. In this same year, the needless deaths and injuries from safety belt nonuse caused an estimated $18 billion in economic costs to society.[15]
- It is estimated safety belts saved more than 14,900 lives in the United States in 2003. Yet, during this same year, 56 percent of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were unrestrained. If all passenger vehicle occupants (over 4 years old) wore safety belts, more than 6,000 additional lives could have been saved.[16]
- 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.[17]
- 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 alone. In 2003, an estimated 2,488 lives were saved by air bags.[18]

Strong Safety Belt Laws Can Make a Difference

- There are two types of safety belt laws: primary and secondary. A *primary* safety belt law allows a law enforcement officer to stop a vehicle and issue a citation when the officer simply observes an unbelted driver or passenger. A *secondary* safety belt law means that a citation for not wearing a safety belt can only be written after the officer stops the vehicle for another infraction.
- Primary safety belt laws are much more effective in increasing safety belt use, because people are more likely to buckle up when there is the perceived risk of receiving a citation for not doing so.[19] In 2003, the average safety belt use rate in States with primary enforcement laws was 11 percentage points higher than in States without primary enforcement laws.[20]
- Most teens support primary enforcement safety belt laws. In 2003, a nationwide survey was conducted to determine attitudes regarding primary enforcement safety belt laws. Of those young people 16 to 20 years of age who were surveyed, 64 percent voiced their support for primary enforcement laws.[21]
- One of the strongest predictors of safety belt use among young drivers is a State's safety belt law. From 1998 to 2002, teenage (16-19 years old) driver belt use was significantly lower in crashes occurring in States allowing only secondary enforcement (30 percent) than in crashes occurring in primary law States (49 percent).[22]

Safety Belt Enforcement Programs

- Occupant Protection Selective Traffic Enforcement Programs (sTEPs) involve periods of highly visible safety belt law enforcement combined with extensive media support. These programs are a proven method to rapidly change motorists' safety belt use behavior. Successful Occupant Protection sTEPs have been documented in Canada, Europe, and the United States.[23, 24, 25, 26]
- Highly visible enforcement of safety belt laws is a core strategy to increase safety belt use. States and communities have greater success in achieving increased safety belt use when there is strong enforcement of the law, along with effective media support.[27] This strong enforcement of safety belt laws sends the message that the State takes safety belt use laws seriously. Ultimately, this leads to greater compliance.

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- The Click It or Ticket (CIOT) model has been enormously successful in increasing safety belt use at the community, State, and regional level. This nationwide initiative, a partnership involving NHTSA, the Air Bag & Seat Belt Safety Campaign, and hundreds of law enforcement agencies, increased national belt use by four percentage points in 2003.[28] Safety belt use increased again in 2004, reaching an all-time high of 80 percent.
- Many jurisdictions in the United States have adopted Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL), a system designed to delay full licensure while allowing beginners to obtain their initial experience under lower-risk conditions. There are three stages: a minimum supervised learner's period, an intermediate license, and a full-privilege driver's license after successful completion of the first two stages. A strong GDL system will include education and enforcement of safety belt laws. For example, in North Carolina, the GDL law includes a provision for violations of GDL restrictions that includes safety belt infractions; a conviction extends the interim licensing period for six months from the time of the violation.[29]

Many Organizations Support Strong Safety Belt Laws for Teens

Many organizations have joined with NHTSA to help increase safety belt use among teens because they realize that by doing so, thousands of lives will be saved and millions of injuries will be prevented. These organizations include:

- 4-H
- AAA
- Advocates for Highway/Auto Safety
- Air Bag & Seat Belt Safety Campaign
- American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association
- American School Health Association
- Aspira Association, Inc.
- Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety
- Bacchus and Gamma Peer Education Network
- Brain Injury Association
- Center for Substance Abuse Prevention
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Children's Safety Network
- Circle K International
- Emergency Medical Services for Children
- Emergency Nurses Association/Emergency Nurses CARE
- Family, Career and Community Leaders of America
- Farm Safety 4 Just Kids
- Governors Highway Safety Association
- Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
- International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators
- Jack and Jill of America, Inc.
- Mothers Against Drunk Driving
- Maternal and Child Health Bureau
- National Association of School Resource Officers
- National Association of Teen Institutes
- National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
- National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety
- National Commission Against Drunk Driving
- National Criminal Justice Association
- National Peer Helpers Association
- National Parent Teachers Association
- National SAFE KIDS Campaign
- National Safety Belt Coalition/National Safety Council
- National Student Safety Program
- Network of Employers for Traffic Safety
- Recording Artists, Actors & Athletes Against Drunk Driving (RADD)
- RADD Kids/Team RADD
- Remove Intoxicated Drivers
- The State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors' Association
- Street Law, Inc.
- Students Against Destructive Decisions
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Think First Foundation
- United National Indian Tribal Youth
- U. S. Department of Education
- U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U. S. Department of Justice
- Youth of Virginia Speak Out About Traffic Safety
- YMCA of the United States of America

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Note: The majority of data in this fact sheet is from 2003, which was the latest year available when it went to press.

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