

1979 SURVEY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON HIGHWAY SAFETY

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SAFETY BELTS AND AIRBAGS

Safety belt usage is widely recognized as a cost-effective countermeasure for reducing injuries and deaths associated with traffic accidents; however, only a small percentage of drivers regularly use them. As a result, the Secretary of Transportation has mandated that starting in 1982 automobiles be equipped with either airbags or automatic belts. The next section of this report looks at public attitudes and perceptions with respect to these two countermeasures.

Safety Belt Usage

Almost half of the drivers surveyed (49.9 percent) reported "never or almost never" using their safety belts; only 23.7 percent reported "always or almost always" wearing their safety belts. Moreover, the latter figure is higher than most other estimates, especially observational studies of belt wearing. For example, in a 1978 study for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), only 14 percent of the driving public was observed wearing safety belts.¹

How often do you wear your safety belt?	N	Percent
Always or almost always	356	23.7
More than 1/2 the time	124	8.3
Less than 1/2 the time	269	17.9
Never or almost never	748	49.9

Q.23

¹Opinion Research Corporation, Safety Belt Usage: Survey of Cars in the Traffic Population, U. S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, November 1978.

The above table shows that while safety is the determining factor in a driver's decision to wear safety belts, a substantial number of drivers (34.9 percent) could think of no reason why they would want to do so. When this response is contrasted with the fact that drivers overwhelmingly believe that safety belts reduce the possibility of serious injury in the event of an automobile accident (see table below), it becomes obvious that many drivers do not consider driving a high risk behavior. Indeed, when drivers were asked to rank four different countermeasures in their order of importance for reducing deaths from highway accidents, safety belt usage came out a distant third, behind avoiding drinking and driving and observing the 55 mph speed limit.

In a serious accident, how likely is a safety belt to protect you from serious injury?	N	Percent
Very likely	627	41.6
Somewhat likely	667	44.5
Not very likely	161	10.7
Don't know	48	3.2

Q.27

Drivers were next asked what reasons made them not want to wear a safety belt; the responses were:

Reasons given for not wanting to wear a safety belt.	N*	Percent**
Bother, lazy, forgetful	234	13.9
Uncomfortable	221	13.2
Inconvenient to use	254	15.1
Don't want to be restrained	129	7.7
Fear of entrapment	179	10.7
Doubt value of belts	75	4.5
Other	300	17.9
None	287	17.1

Q.25

*There are more responses than respondents because some drivers gave multiple answers.

**Percent of total responses.

Moreover, the frequency with which survey respondents wear safety belts does not improve when they are passengers in other people's cars. Overwhelmingly, drivers reported that they are rarely or never expected to fasten their safety belts when riding as a passenger in another person's car.

As a passenger in someone else's car, how often are you expected to wear a safety belt?	N	Percent
Always	63	4.2
Frequently	82	5.5
Occasionally	192	12.8
Rarely	400	26.7
Never	738	49.7

Q.26

Drivers, including those who reported infrequent safety belt use, were also asked what reasons made them want to wear a safety belt; their responses are shown below:

Reasons given for wanting to wear safety belts.	N*	Percent**
Safety	632	40.8
Warning/Interlock System	22	1.4
Habit	61	3.9
Support or Comfort	23	1.5
Other	286	18.5
None	524	33.8

Q.24

*There are more responses than respondents because some drivers gave several answers.

**Percent of total responses.

The main reasons given for not wanting to wear a safety belt are bother, discomfort, and inconvenience. Only 19.1% of the drivers surveyed could think of no reason for *not* wearing a belt. Although it cannot be proved, the latter number is probably the true indicator of how many people always wear their safety belts.

From the responses cited above, it appears that few drivers question the utility of safety belts; only 4.5% said that they doubted the value of wearing a safety belt and only 10.7% said they feared being trapped in a car. However, several factors suggest that a substantial number still may have their doubts. First, while only 8.3% of the drivers thought a safety belt would be very likely to cause a serious injury in an accident, 40.1% thought it would be somewhat likely to do so.

How likely is a safety belt to <i>cause</i> serious injury?	N	%
Very likely	124	8.3
Somewhat likely	601	40.1
Not very likely	725	48.3
Don't know	50	3.3

Q.28

Second, if drivers actually recognized the true value of safety belts, one would expect that belt usage would be correlated to risk perceptions. However, drivers who perceive a high degree of risk wear them no more often than those who perceive a low degree of risk. Nor is safety belt usage related to past accident involvement. Drivers who obey the speed limit wear their belts more often ($p < .05$).

Finally, as an indicator of how well drivers understand the functioning of an airbag, they were asked whether it was necessary to still wear a lap belt in cars equipped with airbags. As many drivers answered the question correctly as did incorrectly (44.4 percent correct, 44.3 percent incorrect); however, the percentage of incorrect answers is substantial. This indicates a need for additional public information and education efforts on the operation of airbags.

Is it necessary to wear a lap belt in cars equipped with air bags?	N	Percent
Yes	666	44.4
No	665	44.3
Don't Know	169	11.3

Q.33

Summary of Findings on Automatic Restraints

- 38 percent of survey respondents thought that automatic safety belts were a good idea, but 32.3 percent also indicated they would disconnect them.
- Drivers who regularly wear safety belts are more likely to endorse automatic belts than infrequent belt wearers.
- The more control a driver feels he has over preventing an accident the less favorable is his attitude towards automatic safety belts.
- 50.7 percent of the drivers polled preferred airbags; 39.8 percent preferred automatic safety belts.
- 44.4 percent of survey respondents knew that a lap belt must be worn in connection with an airbag, but 55.6 percent did not know this.

Frequency of Safety Belt Usage	Usual Speed on 55 MPH Highways									
	55 or less		55-60		61-65		66-70		Over 70	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always	217	61.3	115	32.5	17	4.8	5	1.4	NA	NA
More than half	72	58.5	45	36.6	4	3.3	1	0.8	1	0.8
Less than half	144	53.9	102	38.2	14	5.2	6	2.2	1	0.4
Never	352	44.8	298	39.9	70	9.4	23	3.1	3	0.4

When the above findings are combined with the fact that 34.9 percent of survey respondents could think of no reason for wanting to wear safety belts, the implication would seem to be that despite the fact that nearly 90 percent of licensed drivers believe safety belts protect automobile occupants from injury during an accident, many under-value the utility of belt usage and/or do not associate safety belt wearing with safe driving. Future efforts at public education might find it fruitful to concentrate on persuading drivers that safe driving involves belt usage, especially in high risk situations (e.g., driving in heavy traffic, during inclement weather, and on unsafe roads).

In which region do drivers most often use their safety belts?

Frequency of Safety Belt Usage	Region							
	Northeast		South		North Central		West	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always or almost always	80	23.3	110	22.9	84	20.8	82	30.4
More than half	34	9.9	37	7.7	27	6.7	26	9.6
Less than half	60	17.5	78	16.3	81	20.0	50	18.5
Never	169	49.3	255	53.1	212	52.5	112	41.5

Forty percent of the drivers in Western states reported using their safety belts more than half of the time, this was significantly more often than drivers from other regions of the country ($p < .05$). This agrees with the results of Opinion Research Corporation's observed use survey which found drivers in the West most likely to wear belts. Drivers in the North Central states use their belts the least (72.5% reported using their belts less than half the time), but the South had the greatest number of drivers who never use safety belts. In addition, the more frequently drivers use roads with 55 mph speed limits, the less likely they are to wear safety belts ($p < .05$).

Frequency of Safety Belt Usage	Driving Frequency on 55 MPH Highways							
	Almost All		More than Half		Less than Half		Very Little	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always	110	23.1	104	24.4	75	23.4	67	24.5
More than half	40	8.4	47	11.0	22	6.9	15	5.5
Less than half	77	16.2	71	16.7	75	23.4	45	16.4
Never	249	52.3	204	47.9	148	46.3	147	53.6

Would an insurance reduction increase belt wearing?

If you could get a large insurance reduction for wearing your safety belt, how likely would you be to do so?	N	%
Very likely	1137	75.8
Somewhat likely	194	12.9
Not very likely	147	9.8

Q.29

When drivers were asked how likely they would be to wear a safety belt if they could get a large insurance reduction for doing so, over 75% said very likely. Whether they would actually do so is uncertain; however, the proposal deserves serious consideration.

Summary of Safety Belt Usage Findings

- 23.7% of the survey sample reported using safety belts "always or almost always"; however, 49.9% reported "never or almost never" wearing them.
- When passengers in another driver's car, 76.4% of surveyed reported rarely or never being expected to wear a safety belt; hence, the frequency of safety belt use does not increase when survey respondents are passengers in another person's car.
- The most common reason drivers give for using safety belts is safety; however, a substantial number of drivers (34.9%) could think of no reason why they would want to wear a safety belt.
- The principal complaints against wearing a safety belt are bother, discomfort, and inconvenience; however, 19.1% of the drivers polled could think of no reason not to wear a safety belt.
- A substantial majority of drivers (86.1%) think safety belts are at least somewhat likely to prevent a serious injury in a serious accident. Forty-two percent think that they are very likely to do so.
- Overall it appears that a substantial number of drivers under-value the utility of safety belt use and/or do not associate safety belt wearing with safe driving practices.
- Drivers from Western states report wearing their safety belts more often than drivers from other regions of the country, and the more frequently a driver uses roads with 55 mph speed limits, the less likely he or she is to wear safety belts.

Public Attitudes on Occupant Restraint Legislation

Survey respondents were asked to state their opinion on the issue of occupant restraint legislation. When asked if their opinion of a law requiring all children under age five to ride in a special car safety seat, 84% said they "favored" such a law (65% "strongly favor"). In addition, over 60% said that they favored a law requiring everyone under age 18 to wear a safety belt, and 52% replied that they favored such a law for everyone.

Position on Occupant Re- straint Law	Occupant Restraint Law					
	General SBU Law (for Everyone)		Limited SBU Law (For People Under 18)		Child Restraint Law (For Children Under 5)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly favor	436	29.1	490	32.7	975	65.0
Somewhat favor	344	22.9	415	27.7	280	18.7
Somewhat opposed	282	18.8	321	21.4	114	7.6
Strongly opposed	422	28.1	256	17.1	120	8.0

(Q.30,31,32)

As expected, drivers who report greater use of safety belts are also more in favor of child restraint laws for children under age 5; however, public support for child restraint laws is so great that several other factors which influence public support for other types of occupant restraint laws (e.g., perceived risk of an accident, prior accident involvement, and driver perceptions of control) are not significantly related to support for a child restraint law.

Position on Child Restraint Law	Frequency of Safety Belt Usage							
	Always		More than Half		Less than Half		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly favor	262	74.6	81	65.9	169	63.3	460	61.7
Somewhat favor	55	15.7	20	16.3	59	22.1	146	19.6
Somewhat opposed	15	4.3	12	9.8	25	9.4	62	8.3
Strongly opposed	19	5.4	10	8.1	14	5.2	77	10.3

As the above table indicates, even 61.7 percent of those drivers reporting that they never wear safety belts say they are strongly in favor of child restraint laws for children under age 5. Driver age was the only other factor related to a person's position on child restraint laws, with older drivers favoring such a law more than younger ones ($p. < .05$).

Position on Child Restraint Law	Driver Age											
	16-17		18-24		25-34		35-49		50-64		Over 65	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly favor	18	48.6	166	64.3	259	61.8	255	65.6	176	71.8	94	71.2
Somewhat favor	9	24.3	69	26.7	75	17.9	70	18.0	35	14.3	21	15.9
Somewhat opposed	8	21.6	14	5.4	44	10.5	27	6.9	15	6.1	6	4.5
Strongly opposed	2	5.4	9	3.5	41	9.8	37	9.5	19	7.8	11	8.3

Several variables, however, were found to be significantly correlated to driver support for other types of occupant restraint legislation. These include:

- Frequency of safety belt usage
- Accident history
- Driver perceptions of control

In addition, driver age is significantly related to support for a limited safety belt usage law (i.e., one covering people under age 18) but not for a general safety belt usage law (i.e., one covering everyone). Also, risk perception is unrelated to support for either a limited or general safety belt usage law.

Do drivers who report greater safety belt use favor occupant restraint legislation more?

Frequency of Safety Belt Usage	Position on General SBU Law*						Position on Limited SBU Law**									
	Strongly Favor		Somewhat Favor		Somewhat Oppose		Strongly Favor		Somewhat Favor		Somewhat Oppose		Strongly Oppose			
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%		
Always	212	60.4	69	19.7	34	9.7	36	10.3	226	64.4	68	19.4	30	8.5	27	7.7
More than Half	50	40.3	33	26.6	22	17.7	19	15.3	48	38.7	40	32.3	22	17.7	14	11.3
Less than Half	78	29.4	80	30.2	56	21.1	51	19.2	86	32.6	89	33.7	61	23.1	28	10.6
Never	96	13.0	160	21.6	169	22.8	316	42.6	129	17.4	217	29.3	207	28.0	187	25.3

*Law applies to everyone.

**Law applies only to people under age 18.

Respondents showing the strongest support for mandatory safety belt use also report wearing their safety belts the most often ($p < .05$). Note, however, that support from both frequent belt wearers and infrequent belt wearers is greater for the limited occupant restraint law. By collapsing the opinion and usage categories, these trends become even more obvious.

Frequency of Safety Belt Usage	Position on General SBU Law*				Position on Limited SBU Law**			
	Favor		Oppose		Favor		Oppose	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Always/more than half	364	76.6	111	23.4	382	80.0	93	20.0
Less than half/never	414	41.1	592	58.9	521	51.9	483	48.1

*Law applies to everyone.

**Law applies only to people under age 18.

Support for occupant restraint legislation also varies according to the accident history of respondents. Drivers involved in more accidents over the last five years were less inclined to support occupant restraint legislation ($p < .05$); a somewhat puzzling finding in that one would expect the "accident-prone" driver to have a greater appreciation for the risks involved in driving and for the benefits of wearing safety belts. On the other hand, drivers overly involved in accidents tend to take a more reckless attitude with respect to driving. The following table relates accident involvement over the past five years to support for occupant restraint legislation.

Accident Involvement	Position on General SBU Law*				Position on Limited SBU Law**			
	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %
None	276 32.4	180 21.1	161 18.9	236 27.7	304 35.7	227 26.7	180 21.2	140 16.5
One	118 28.9	105 25.7	81 19.8	105 25.7	128 31.2	126 30.7	92 22.4	64 15.6
Two	33 23.6	41 29.3	22 15.7	44 31.4	44 31.4	39 27.9	27 19.3	30 21.4
Three	5 9.4	13 24.5	14 26.4	21 39.6	7 13.5	18 34.6	14 26.9	13 25.0
Four or more	2 7.7	5 19.2	3 11.5	16 61.5	4 15.4	5 19.2	8 30.8	9 34.6

*Law applies to everyone.

**Law applies only to people under age 18.

The confidence that drivers have in their ability to prevent accidents reflects their position on the need for occupant restraint laws. Drivers who feel they have almost total or a lot of control over automobile accidents support occupant restraint laws less than those who feel they have some or very little control ($p < .05$). However, this finding is qualified by the fact that over 80% of all drivers surveyed thought they had "almost total" or "a lot" of control over preventing accidents; thus the strength of the association is weak.

Perceived Control Over Accidents	Position on General SBU Law*				Position on Limited SBU Law**			
	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %
Almost total	161 29.0	106 19.1	111 20.0	177 31.9	199 36.0	128 23.1	111 20.1	115 20.8
A Lot	193 28.9	172 25.7	120 18.0	183 27.4	203 30.3	205 30.6	156 23.3	106 15.8
Some	74 32.6	54 23.8	46 20.3	53 23.3	74 32.9	72 32.0	48 21.3	31 13.8
Very Little	5 19.2	11 42.3	3 11.5	7 26.9	11 42.3	9 34.6	3 11.5	3 11.5

Which age group feels most favorably towards restraint usage laws?

Driver Age	Position on General SBU Law*				Position on Limited SBU Law**			
	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %	Strongly Favor N %	Somewhat Favor N %	Somewhat Oppose N %	Strongly Oppose N %
16-17	9 24.3	6 16.2	8 21.6	14 37.8	7 18.9	12 32.4	7 18.9	11 29.7
18-24	56 21.7	65 25.2	56 21.7	81 31.4	64 24.8	81 31.4	70 27.1	43 16.7
25-34	110 26.2	108 25.7	78 18.6	124 29.5	118 28.2	121 28.9	97 23.2	83 19.8
35-49	133 34.3	92 23.7	65 16.8	98 25.3	146 37.7	110 28.4	70 18.1	61 15.8
50-64	89 36.2	47 19.1	45 18.3	65 26.4	99 40.4	54 22.0	51 20.8	41 16.7
Over 65	37 29.4	25 19.8	27 21.4	37 29.4	52 40.9	36 28.3	24 18.9	15 11.8

*Law applies to everyone.

**Law applies only to people under age 18.

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There is no relationship between age and support for a general safety belt usage law; however, age is significantly related to support for a limited safety belt usage law (i.e., one that applies only to persons under age 18). In the latter case, older drivers favor the law more than younger drivers ($p < .05$).

Summary of Public Opinion on Occupant Restraint Laws

- The public seems to be overwhelmingly in favor of child restraint laws (84% in favor), and in favor of a safety belt usage law applicable only to people under age 18 (60% in favor), and in favor of a general safety belt usage law applicable to everyone (52% in favor).
- Support for occupant restraint legislation is strongest among those who regularly wear safety belts.
- Support for a child restraint law is not related in a statistically significant way to perceived risk of an accident, perceived control over an accident or prior accident involvement; however, these variables were significantly related to driver support for both a general and a limited safety belt usage law.
- Older drivers support child restraint laws and restraint laws for people under age 18 more so than do younger drivers. There is no relationship between age and support for a safety belt usage law applicable to everyone.

Public Attitudes on Automatic Restraints

Automatic restraints are safety systems that are built into the vehicle to protect vehicle occupants from death and injury during crashes. Since they are built into automobiles, no voluntary action, such as fastening a safety belt, is required of car occupants. In 1982, new full-sized passenger cars sold in the U.S. will be required to come equipped with front-seat automatic restraint systems; by 1983, all new intermediate and compact cars must be so equipped.

There are currently two types of automatic restraint systems: automatic safety belts and airbags. Automatic safety belts are designed to move into place as passengers are seated: no buckling is required. Airbags are inflatable cushions installed in the dashboard and steering wheel of automobiles. In a crash, these bags automatically inflate, thus preventing the driver and/or passenger from striking the car's interior surfaces.

Survey respondents were first asked what they thought of automatic safety belts; 38% thought they were "a great idea", but 32.3% indicated they would disconnect them. One driver in four said they would tolerate the device.

Position on Automatic Safety Belts	N	Percent
A Great Idea	570	38.0
Tolerate	375	25.0
Disconnect	484	32.3
Other	18	1.2
Don't Know	53	3.5

Q.7

Not surprisingly, drivers who report frequent use of safety belts were more likely to endorse automatic safety belts than non-belt wearers ($p < .05$).

Position on Automatic Safety Belts	Frequency of Safety Belt Usage							
	Always		More than Half		Less than Half		Never	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
A Great Idea	236	66.5	56	45.2	111	41.3	165	22.1
Tolerate	82	23.1	38	30.6	85	31.6	169	22.6
Disconnect	21	5.9	21	16.9	60	22.3	382	51.1
Other	5	1.5	4	3.2	0	0.0	9	1.2

A second factor related to a person's attitude on automatic safety belts is the degree of control that person feels he has over becoming involved in an accident. The greater the amount of control a person feels he or she has over accidents, the less favorable is their attitude toward automatic safety belts ($p < .05$).

Position on Automatic Safety Belts	Perceived Control Over Accidents							
	Total		A Lot		Some		Very Little	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
A Great Idea	203	37.7	260	39.7	94	42.3	9	34.6
Tolerate	121	22.5	187	28.5	61	27.5	5	19.2
Disconnect	205	38.1	205	31.3	62	27.9	11	42.3
Other	9	1.7	3	0.5	5	2.3	1	3.8

Drivers were also asked whether they preferred the airbag or the automatic safety belt. Although drivers were told that the airbag would cost \$100 to \$200 more than the seat belt, 50.7 percent of the drivers surveyed preferred the airbag to the automatic belt. Approximately 40 percent chose the automatic safety belt.

Public Preference	N	Percent
Airbags	760	50.7
Automatic Belts	577	39.8
Don't Care	20	1.3
Don't Know	123	8.2