

Seat Belt Use by Missouri Teens*

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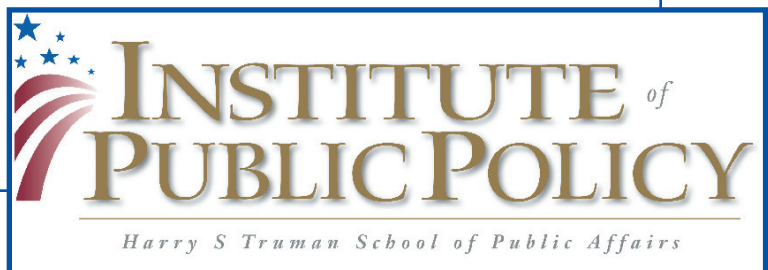
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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the Institute of Public Policy conducted 12 focus groups with Missouri teens on behalf of the Missouri Department of Transportation to:

- 1) understand how teenagers make decisions on seatbelt use; and
- 2) determine what outreach methods could influence teens' decisions regarding seatbelt use and traffic safety.

The study found that teens' seatbelt use is set well before they begin driving, that the lack of use of seatbelts among parents is especially influential, and that teens are not well informed about the consequences of accidents when drivers or passengers are not wearing seatbelts. This report summarizes studies of seatbelt use in Missouri as compared to other states and describes teens' attitudes about seatbelt usage. Finally, it recommends that the Department continue its teen-focused informational campaign and that the state enact primary enforcement of the seatbelt law.²

SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for young Americans, and young drivers have disproportionately high rates of fatal crashes per 100,000 drivers. Young drivers (15 to 20 years old) account for less than seven percent of all drivers, but they are responsible for 20 percent of annual fatalities nationwide. According to NHTSA, approximately two-thirds of teens killed in accidents nationwide were not wearing a safety belt.

In general, teens have a lower use rate than any other age group, but Missouri teens fall far below the national average in seat belt use. Between 1995 and 2000, Missouri ranked 40th in seatbelt use by fatally injured teens, with only 24 percent of drivers belted, and only 15 percent of passengers wearing safety belts. This is compared to the national average of 36 percent for teen drivers and 23 percent for

teen passengers who died in car accidents during this time. Only seven states had more total unbelted fatally injured teenage drivers during this time, and only 11 states had a greater number of unbelted passenger deaths (McCartt and Shabanova, 2002).

Missouri ranked 36th in seat belt use among all age groups in 2002, with fewer than 70 percent of travelers wearing them (NHTSA). In 2005, the Missouri Department of Transportation reported Missouri seat belt use at about 76 percent, compared to 80 percent nationwide. Chaudhary and Preusser calculated that nearly 600 Missouri lives could have been saved between 1995 and 2002 if a primary seatbelt law had been adopted, many of whom would have been teens (2003). This combination of factors heightens concerns about teen safety belt use in Missouri.

MISSOURI TEENS USE OF SEAT BELTS

Generally speaking, three distinct groups of teens of roughly equal size (with some variations by location) emerged in the analysis of the focus group data. The first group includes regular seat belt users who have heard safety messages and incorporated these messages into their beliefs and actions. These teens wear seatbelts on most occasions, often encourage others to do so, and are reasonably well informed on traffic safety. Unfortunately, nearly as many teens adamantly refuse to use seatbelts and tend to either disregard or even refute basic public safety arguments about seatbelts. This second group is clearly the most difficult to reach with media or other outreach campaigns. However, some non-users admitted that a real possibility of getting a ticket or being "hassled by cops" could persuade them to buckle up, which suggests that a primary enforcement law would convert some of these teens. The remaining group is somewhere in the middle and includes situational users of seatbelts. These teens tend to accept the message that seatbelts enhance safety, but they choose not to use seatbelts under a variety of conditions. Clearly, outreach efforts have the greatest potential for affecting change within this final group.

¹Based upon "An Analysis of Teen Seatbelt Use & a Media Campaign in Missouri" submitted to the Missouri Department of Transportation, conclusions are those of the authors, not necessarily those of the Missouri Department of Transportation.

²This is a brief version of a longer report which can be found at <http://truman.missouri.edu/ipp/publications>

³Missouri is a secondary enforcement state, meaning that the police cannot stop drivers for not using a seat belt, but can give them a ticket if stopped for other violations. If Missouri were a primary enforcement state, drivers could be stopped and ticketed solely for the failure to wear a seat belt.



A number of trends emerged in the discussions with the teens. First, seatbelt habits are formed much earlier than driving age so efforts to change behavior need to be directed to children and young teens. Most of the participants remembered using seatbelts or booster seats as children, so there is clearly a foundation upon which to build, but at some point (typically reported to be in the 10- to 14-year-old range) substantial numbers change that behavior. Many of the focus group participants stated outreach efforts to teens were already a lost cause because seatbelt habits are set at a younger age.

A second related observation is that parents matter in a number of ways. First, the parents can be pivotal in maintaining seatbelt use during the danger zone of the pre-teens and young teens. Second, parental seatbelt use sets an important example that children notice. Parental use is not always emulated by teens, but non-use certainly appears to be more closely imitated. This trend holds for other public health areas such as smoking, and it certainly supports the use of outreach campaigns that remind parents about the effect of their actions on their children.

The discussions also suggested that urban legends about seatbelts are firmly rooted in Missouri culture and that these beliefs may contribute to low seatbelt usage rates. At nearly every location, the facilitators heard stories about how seatbelts could kill someone, such as tearing someone in half, damaging major organs, trapping the occupant in water or a fire, and other such calamities. Further, many teens have a fundamental misunderstanding of how basic physics work in an accident. For example, some believe a vehicle with more people in it would be too heavy to flip over so seatbelts are not needed, and others think they would have enough reaction time in an accident to protect themselves. To make matters worse, many teens have little sense of the proportions involved in accidents. As a result, one story on the Weather Channel about someone trapped in a car has equal weight with the thousands of lives saved by seatbelts. Reminders to wear seatbelts and stories attempting to scare them straight will work for some situational users, but outreach efforts will have to more directly confront these misunderstandings to have much effect with those teens (and likely some adults) who persist in these beliefs.

Unfortunately, even the best outreach efforts will not change attitudes or behaviors for some non-users. One Independence male said, “If I was reminded all the time I probably would click my seatbelt on the ride home because we’ve been talking about it all day. But like tomorrow when I wake up, I’ll probably forget.” A Kennett female pushed it even further when she said that: “I think for me to wear my seatbelt all the time I’d probably have to get in an accident.” Clearly, personal experience will be the only decisive factor for her.

For many of the hard core non-users, strong enforcement, not outreach, is the key to behavioral change. Many participants expressed a concern about getting a ticket or a desire to avoid being “hassled by cops”, but they also do not believe law enforcement cares much about the issue. Part of the problem is the perception that police officers do not want to take time to do “all of the paperwork” and that it is “not a big thing” to officers. Perhaps more of a problem is the contradiction between the tough enforcement implied by a “Click It or Ticket” campaign and the limitations on enforcement associated with secondary enforcement of the seatbelt law. Teens know they have driven by law officers and not received tickets so they may perceive indifference rather than understanding that the officer is limited by secondary enforcement.

Finally, few teens know of anyone who has received a seatbelt ticket. The confusion over the law that contributes to their inflated sense of the fine (most teens thought it was between \$50 and \$100) may increase seatbelt use, but their perception of lax enforcement clearly reduces their seatbelt use. To increase seatbelt use, law enforcement officers should be encouraged to issue citations when appropriate, but passage of a primary enforcement seatbelt law appears to be a more important component in changing perceptions that wearing a seatbelt is the law in Missouri.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the focus group findings, as well as a comparison of policy implemented in other states, the Institute of Public Policy made two recommendations for policy action in Missouri:

- 1) Informational campaigns should continue, educating teen motorists about the magnitude of risk associated with not wearing seatbelts, and focusing on parents of children and teens as well. Past campaigns have proven successful in raising seatbelt use overall. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration credits the “Click It or Ticket” campaigns in 2003 for raising seatbelt use by 4 percentage points nationwide, from 75% in 2002 to 79% in 2003 (Safety Belt Use in 2003). These campaigns combine targeted advertising and media attention with highly visible law enforcement activities for a short amount of time.

- 2) Missouri’s secondary enforcement law should be upgraded to a primary enforcement law.³ As of February 2006, 24 states had primary seat belt laws, allowing law enforcement officers to issue tickets for the sole violation of not wearing a safety belt. In 2004, 84 percent of motorists in primary law states used seat belts, versus 73 percent in other states (NHSTA). According to a study by Dee and Evans, primary seatbelt laws increased use by about 30 percent in those states, while secondary laws resulted in a 15 percent increase after adoption. Young drivers are more likely to engage

³in 2006, Senator Shields introduced legislation that includes primary seat belt enforcement.



in risky behavior than older drivers, and are therefore at greater risk when they choose not to buckle up. In addition, Missouri teens have a much lower seatbelt usage rate (40th in the nation between 1995 and 2000). States that have implemented primary seat belt laws have proven that stricter enforcement increases teen usage rates; therefore, adopting a primary enforcement law in Missouri would significantly increase seatbelt use and save lives.

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