

1980 SURVEY OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS ON HIGHWAY SAFETY

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SECTION 4
SAFETY BELTS

The 1980 survey again found a wide discrepancy between public attitudes and perceptions about safety belts and the public's usage of safety belts. While it is widely believed that safety belts may help to prevent serious injury in an automobile accident, usage of safety belts remains low. There is evidence even that the discrepancy between perceptions about safety belts and actual usage may be widening further. Beginning with the 1982 model year, airbags or automatic belts will be mandatory equipment on some new automobiles. This section of the report examines safety belts usage and public attitudes and perceptions regarding safety belts and the anticipated airbag or automatic belt requirement.

SAFETY BELT USAGE. Table 4-1 shows a significant decrease ($p < .01$) in safety belt usage from the level of usage as measured by the 1979 survey. Of the 1,500 drivers in the current survey 59 percent reported that they never or almost never wear a safety belt; just under 50 percent of the drivers in the 1979 survey were in this category.

Table 4-1

HOW OFTEN DO YOU WEAR YOUR SAFETY BELT	1979		1980	
	N	PERCENT	N	PERCENT
Always or almost always	356	23.7	323	21.5
More than half the time	124	8.3	86	5.7
Less than half the time	269	17.9	206	13.7
Never or almost never	748	49.9	885	59.0

Q.21

Similarly, 32 percent of drivers surveyed in 1979 used a safety belt at least half the time; only 27 percent of the drivers in the 1980 survey reported similar usage. It should also be noted that these estimates are higher than those usually obtained in observational studies of belt wearing. Thus, reports of actual belt usage may be overstated.

When asked what reasons make them want to wear a safety belt, over 58 percent of the respondents indicated safety reasons. Even among those drivers who never or almost never wear a safety belt, over 42 percent reported safety as the reason that would make them want to wear a safety belt. The complete distribution of reasons given by respondents is shown in Table 4-2.

Table 4-2

WHAT REASONS MAKE YOU WANT TO WEAR YOUR SAFETY BELT?	N	PERCENT
Safety	871	58.1
Warning/Interlock system	36	2.4
Habit	66	4.4
Provides Support, Comfort, etc.	59	3.9
Other	76	5.1
No Reason	479	31.9

Q.22

Table 4-3 indicates that over 83 percent of the drivers surveyed feel that a safety belt is likely to provide protection against serious injury in an accident.

Table 4-3

IN A SERIOUS ACCIDENT HOW LIKELY IS A SAFETY BELT TO PROTECT YOU FROM SERIOUS INJURY?	N	PERCENT
Very likely	619	41.5
Somewhat likely	620	41.6
Not very likely	161	10.8
Not at all likely	90	6.1

Q.24

Thus, it is apparent that while most drivers feel that safety belts may be effective in preventing injuries in accidents, they also believe that their probability of being in an accident is low. Consequently, drivers do not feel compelled to wear their safety belts. As shown in Table 4-4, the inconvenience of using safety belts, the lack of comfort, and the simple bother of connecting and wearing belts appear to outweigh the safety considerations associated with their use. Only 17 percent of the drivers surveyed could think of no reason which makes them not want to wear a safety belt.

Table 4-4

WHAT REASONS MAKE YOU NOT WANT TO WEAR YOUR SAFETY BELT?	N	PERCENT
Don't want to be bothered	410	27.3
Uncomfortable	293	19.5
Inconvenient	324	21.6
Don't want to be restrained	166	11.1
Afraid of being trapped	208	13.9
Doubt Value	110	7.3
Other	116	7.7
No Reason	259	17.3

Q.23

The notion that the injury protection offered by safety belts is not a compelling reason for their usage is further supported by the fact that frequency of belt usage is not correlated with risk perception. Thus, those drivers who feel that they have a high probability of being involved in an accident in the next year do not use their safety belts any more frequently than those drivers who feel their chances of being in an accident are low. Similarly, drivers who feel a high risk of being injured in an accident are not more likely to use their safety belts than those drivers who feel that their risk of injury is low. In addition, no significant relationships were observed when frequency of seat belt usage was contrasted with accident involvement over the past five years and with usual driving speed.

ATTITUDES ON HIGHWAY SAFETY LEGISLATION. When drivers were asked for their opinion about a law that would require all children under age five to ride in a special car safety belt, almost 78 percent favored such a law, with about 57 percent strongly in favor. Although these results indicate that drivers are strongly in support of a child restraint law, they also represent a decrease from the level of support measured by the 1979 survey which found 94 percent of drivers in favor, with 65 percent strongly in favor.

Table 4-5

POSITION ON CHILD RESTRAINT LAW	N	PERCENT
Strongly favor	859	57.3
Somewhat favor	308	20.5
Somewhat oppose	138	9.2
Strongly oppose	141	9.4
No opinion	54	3.6

Q.26

Three factors were found to be significantly associated with drivers' opinions on a child restraint law. These factors are age, recall of safety belt P.I.&E. messages, and perceived likelihood of an accident. The comparison with age in Table 4-6 shows that support for a child restraint law is strongest among the youngest and the oldest drivers and tends to decrease somewhat in the middle age groups ($p < .01$).

As shown in Table 4-7, those drivers who recall seeing or hearing a message about safety belts favored the child restraint law more frequently than those who did not recall a message ($p < .05$). It would appear that the safety belt message has the effect of strengthening a favorable position on the child restraint law.

Table 4-6

POSITION ON CHILD RESTRAINT	AGE											
	16 - 17		18 - 24		25 - 34		35 - 49		50 - 64		65 & OVER	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly favor	32	69.6	140	58.1	247	58.7	182	54.8	160	61.5	94	67.1
That favor	9	19.6	71	29.5	77	18.3	69	20.8	51	19.6	29	20.7
That oppose	3	6.5	15	6.2	51	12.1	39	11.7	22	8.5	8	5.7
Strongly oppose	2	4.3	15	6.6	46	10.9	42	12.7	27	10.4	9	6.4

Table 4-7

RECALL SAFETY BELT P.I.&E. MESSAGES	POSITION ON CHILD RESTRAINT LAW							
	STRONGLY FAVOR		SOMEWHAT FAVOR		SOMEWHAT OPPOSE		STRONGLY OPPOSE	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	429	64.2	123	18.4	56	8.4	60	9.0
No	429	55.2	185	23.8	82	10.6	81	10.4

Table 4-8 displays the association ($p < .05$) between drivers' perceptions of their likelihood of having an accident and their attitudes toward a child restraint law. Drivers whose perceptions of their chances of having an accident are most accurate tend to favor the child restraint law most strongly. Previous involvement in accidents during the past five years, however, was found not to be associated with drivers' attitudes on this law.

Table 4-8

POSITION ON CHILD RESTRAINT LAW	LIKELIHOOD OF AN ACCIDENT											
	1 IN 5		1 IN 10		1 IN 50		1 IN 100		1 IN 500		1 IN 1000	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Strongly favor	120	70.9	98	63.2	124	60.2	136	55.1	87	57.2	234	58.4
Somewhat favor	18	12.8	24	15.5	48	23.3	53	21.5	37	24.3	97	24.2
Somewhat oppose	9	6.4	19	12.3	12	5.8	32	13.0	16	10.5	32	8.0
Strongly oppose	14	9.9	14	9.0	22	10.7	26	10.5	12	7.9	38	9.5

A second question about highway safety legislation sought drivers' attitudes in regard to a law requiring all motorcyclists to wear helmets. From the distribution of responses in Table 4-9, over 83 percent of surveyed drivers were in favor of a helmet law, with almost 73 percent strongly in favor.

Table 4-9

POSITION ON MOTOR- CYCLE HELMET LAW	N	PERCENT
Strongly favor	1,092	72.8
Somewhat favor	159	10.6
Somewhat oppose	85	5.7
Strongly oppose	122	8.1
No opinion	42	2.8

Q.27

Attitudes about the helmet law vary significantly among regions (p.<.01) as shown in Table 4-10. Drivers in the Northeast are most in favor of the law, while drivers in the West favor the law least.

Table 4-10

REGION	POSITION ON MOTORCYCLE HELMET LAW							
	STRONGLY FAVOR		SOMEWHAT FAVOR		SOMEWHAT OPPOSE		STRONGLY OPPOSE	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Northeast	252	76.6	45	13.7	14	4.3	18	5.5
South	356	75.7	55	11.7	33	7.0	26	5.5
North Central	298	75.3	35	8.8	19	4.8	44	11.1
West	186	70.7	24	9.1	19	7.2	34	12.9

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; and by 1984, all new cars will be required to have such restraint systems.

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.

Public support for automatic safety belts appears to have increased significantly over the level found in the 1979 survey. As shown in Table 4-11, nearly half of the drivers surveyed indicated a preference for automatic belts rather than airbags; only about 39 percent of the drivers in the 1979 survey preferred automatic belts. It should be noted, however, that the increased preference for automatic belts may be due in part to the fact that, as stated in the survey question, airbags are likely to cost \$200 to \$300 more than automatic belts. The 1979 survey question estimated the cost differential at only \$100 to \$200.

Table 4-11

PREFERENCE FOR AUTOMATIC RESTRAINTS	1979		1980	
	N	%	N	%
Airbags	760	50.7	584	39.0
Automatic Belts	577	38.5	738	49.2
Doesn't matter	20	1.3	22	1.5
Don't know	123	8.2	109	7.3
No opinion	20	1.3	46	3.1

Q.29

The increased preference for automatic belts, nevertheless, reflects a more positive attitude about automatic belts among the driving public. Approximately 45 percent of the drivers surveyed indicated that automatic belts are a good idea and they would probably wear them, while about 29 percent thought that they would wear an automatic belt even though they did not like the idea very much. In comparison, only 38 percent of the drivers in the 1979 survey felt that automatic belts are a good

idea, while another 25 percent indicated that they would tolerate them. Table 4-12 below displays the complete distribution of responses for the 1980 survey.

Table 4-12

POSITION ON AUTOMATIC SAFETY BELTS		
	N	%
A good idea, would wear belt	679	45.3
Not like the idea, but probably wear belt	436	29.1
Disconnect it	328	21.9
Don't know	57	3.8

Q.28

Drivers who report wearing their safety belts most often also have the most positive attitudes about automatic safety belts ($p < .01$). This comparison is shown in Table 4-13.

Table 4-13

POSITION ON AUTO- MATIC SAFETY BELT	ALWAYS		MORE THAN HALF		LESS THAN HALF		NEVER	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
	A good idea	225	71.0	54	67.5	113	57.4	287
Probably wear	64	20.2	21	26.3	66	33.5	285	33.6
Disconnect	28	8.8	5	6.3	18	9.1	277	32.6

Attitudes about automatic belts do not appear to be affected by P.I.&E. messages about either safety belts or automatic belts since the attitudes of drivers who recall such messages did not differ significantly from the attitudes of those drivers who did not recall any messages. In addition, previous accident involvement was not associated with attitudes about automatic belts.

RECALL OF P.I.&E. MESSAGES ABOUT SAFETY OR AUTOMATIC RESTRAINTS. A substantial increase in the percentage of drivers who could recall seeing or hearing a P.I.&E. message about safety belts was again recorded for the 1980 survey. Over 46 percent of the drivers surveyed recalled seeing or hearing a safety belt message as compared with only 35 percent in the 1979 survey. Buckle-up ads were recalled most frequently; the percentage of drivers who could not recall the theme of the message was down from 29 percent in 1979 to only 13 percent. Table 4-14 displays the complete distribution of themes recalled by the drivers surveyed.

Table 4-14

WHAT WAS THE THEME OR CONTENT OF THE MESSAGE?	N	PERCENT
Buckle-up ads	508	73.4
Safety belt demos	38	5.5
Accident statistics	77	11.1
Other	25	3.6
Don't remember	93	13.4

Q.32

While recall of safety belt P.I.&E. messages is greater than that recorded in previous surveys, the 1980 results do not indicate that the messages have a consistently positive effect. For example, no relationship was found between frequency of safety belt usage and recall of safety belt messages. Similarly, drivers' perceptions of the value of safety belts for protecting against serious injury in an accident did not differ among those drivers who recalled a safety belt message and those who did not recall such a message. However, drivers who recalled a safety belt message were more likely to ask other people to wear their safety belts ($p < .01$). This comparison is shown in Table 4-15.

Table 4-15

RECALL OF SAFETY BELT P.I.&E MESSAGES	HOW OFTEN DO YOU ASK OTHER PEOPLE TO WEAR THEIR SAFETY BELTS?									
	ALWAYS		FREQUENTLY		SOMETIMES		RARELY		NEVER	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Yes	94	13.6	57	8.2	56	8.1	98	14.2	387	55.9
No	62	7.7	56	6.9	82	10.2	105	13.0	502	62.2

Nearly 33 percent of the drivers surveyed recalled seeing or hearing a message about airbags or automatic belts. "How airbags work" was the theme recalled most frequently, as displayed in Table 4-16.

Table 4-16

WHAT WAS THE THEME OR CONTENT OF THE MESSAGE	N	PERCENT
How airbags work	315	64.3
Mandatory installation	35	7.1
Too costly	30	6.1
Don't work	12	2.4
Other	32	6.5
Don't Remember	77	15.7

Q.31

No significant relationships were found between recall of P.I.&E. messages about airbags or automatic belts and attitudes about automatic belts or preference for airbags or automatic belts.