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Administration

TRAFFIC TECH

Technology Transfer Series



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The 2016 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey: Seat Belt Report

Background

Observational studies show that, although most drivers use seat belts, a sizeable minority (an estimated 10% in 2017) choose not to wear their belts. Furthermore, while statistics from NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis indicate that the percentage of fatally injured passenger vehicle occupants who were unbelted has decreased over the past 10 years from 54% in 2007 to 48% in 2016, the proportion remains high at almost half of all passenger vehicle fatalities. The 2016 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey (MVOSS), which is the seventh in a series of periodic national surveys on occupant protection issues, provides an opportunity to understand the underlying facets involved in these safety-related decisions. The survey measured individuals' attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge regarding seat belts, child passenger safety, emergency medical services, and crash injury experience. This Traffic Tech focuses on the use of seat belts.

Method

Unlike previous MVOSS iterations, the 2016 survey used address-based sampling with web and paper surveys to reach respondents 18 or older. Survey administration began on June 14, 2016, and ended on February 24, 2017. MVOSS used two questionnaire versions. One focused on seat belt use, whereas the other focused on child passenger safety. The multimode design, with mail contact and web and mail response modes, took place over five contact periods. Respondents received a \$1 non-contingent incentive and a \$5 contingent incentive for participation.

MVOSS contacted a random sample of 21,000 households allocated proportionally across the 10 NHTSA Regions to reach the goal of 6,000 completed surveys focused on belt use. The final sample included 6,009 respondents with a response rate of 31%. A majority of the respondents (58%, or 3,502 of 6,009) completed the survey by mail using the paper survey. Among the 2,507 web respondents, three-quarters (75%, or 1,889) completed the survey using a desktop or laptop. The remainder were almost evenly split between smart phones (334) and tablets (284). To ensure representativeness of the sample, survey statisticians applied post-stratification adjustments to the final weights. Sample sizes on graphs are less than the overall sample size due to a small proportion of item nonresponse.

Results

An estimated 93% of drivers report that they wear their seat belts "all of the time," an increase in reported usage from the previous MVOSS (88% in 2007). While reported seat belt use when riding as a passenger in the front seat is similar to the high level when driving, only 63% report always wearing their seat belts when riding in back seats. However, when asked when was the last time they did not wear their seat belts while driving, only 79% report wearing a seat belt every time they drive. Another

8% of drivers who say they always wear their seat belt admit to not wearing their seat belt at some point more than a year ago. Interestingly, 3% of drivers say that they wear a seat belt all the time but admit to not wearing it at least once in the past year. Finally, drivers who admit to wearing a seat belt less than all of the time also tend to report not wearing a seat belt at least once in the last month.

How Often Do You Wear Your Seat Belt? And Last Time You Did Not Wear Seat Belt?

When was the last time you did NOT wear your seat belt when driving?	When driving this vehicle, how often do you wear your seat belt?				
	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Rarely/ Never	Total
I've worn a seat belt every time I've driven	79% (4,446)				79% (4,453)
A year or more ago	8% (491)				8% (500)
Within the past 12 months	3% (179)				3% (196)
Within the past month	2% (110)	1% (70)			3% (183)
Within the past week	1% (51)	2% (134)			4% (215)
Today	1% (29)	1% (46)	1% (35)	1% (30)	3% (140)
Total	93% (5,306)	5% (279)	1% (58)	1% (44)	100% (5,687)

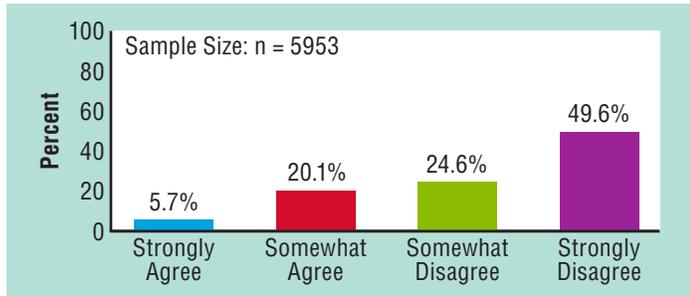
Note: Weighted cell percentages and sample sizes provided only for estimates of 0.5% or greater. Sample size in parentheses. Grand total does not include missing or invalid responses from 108 respondents and skips from 214 respondents, most of whom claimed not to drive.

People give many reasons as to why they wear or do not wear a seat belt. When asked the most important reason for wearing seat belts, the most common response was injury avoidance. In fact, over half of adults (59%) claim this to be the most important reason for wearing belts. When adults who at least on occasion did not wear their belts while driving were asked the most important reason for not wearing a belt, only traveling a short distance was the most common reason given. A little over one-third of adult occasional belt users (37%) claim this to be the most important reason for not wearing belts.

Adults also vary on their attitudes about the utility of seat belts. Almost all adults (88%) strongly agreed with the statement, "If I were in an accident, I would want my seat belt on." However, about one-quarter (26%) either strongly or somewhat agreed with the statement, "Seat belts are just as likely to harm you as help

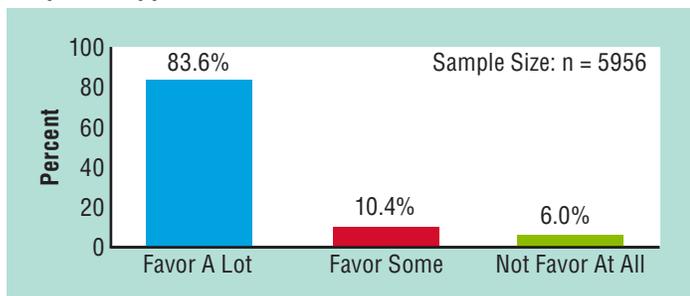
you.” (Graph 1). Twenty-two percent indicated that they found seat belts to be annoying.

Graph 1: Seat Belts Are Just As Likely To Harm You As Help You

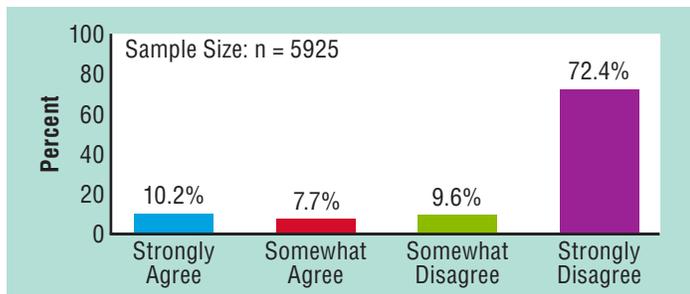


Most adults support seat belt laws, although they differ in their support for the kind of law and penalty associated with breaking the law. Ninety-four percent favored front-seat seat belt laws either “a lot” or somewhat (Graph 2). Of those who favored seat belt laws for front-seat passengers, 77% also favored seat belt laws for adult back-seat passengers. While 73% of adults supported fines for drivers who did not wear their seat belts, only 28% supported points against the license as a penalty.

Graph 2: Support For Front-Seat Seat Belt Laws



Graph 3: Would Feel Self-Conscious Around Friends If I Wore A Seat Belt And Friends Did Not



Beliefs and attitudes revealed some interesting findings. When asked whether one agrees with the statement, “If it is your time to die, you’ll die, so it doesn’t matter whether you wear your seat belt,” 17% of adults agreed. About 12% either somewhat or strongly believed that a crash close to home is not as serious as

one farther away. Finally, about 18% of adults either somewhat or strongly agreed that they would feel self-conscious around their friends if they wore seat belts and their friends did not (Graph 3).

Discussion

This study examined many different aspects of seat belt use compliance. Adults were more likely to wear their seat belts in the front seat rather than in the back seat. Whereas injury avoidance was listed as the most important reason for wearing a seat belt, for those who occasionally did not wear their seat belts, only driving a short distance was the most common reason for not wearing a seat belt. While most adults agree that they would want to have their seat belts on were they in a crash, a surprising number of people believed that seat belts were as likely to harm you as help you. Although most adults favor seat belt laws, they differed on the kind and level of punishment they felt should be issued for a violation. Finally, a small number of adults hold fatalistic beliefs about seat belts, believe that crashes closer to home are less serious, or feel self-conscious wearing their seat belts when their friends do not.

A possible limitation of self-report data is social desirability, where respondents give the socially accepted response, rather than their real answer. For example, although 93% of adults reported wearing their seat belts in the front seat “all of the time” in MVOSS, the National Occupant Protection Use Survey, which measures seat belt use through observation, found 90% of those in the front seats wear their belts. Social desirability also may explain why 3% of adults say they always wear their belts when driving even though they admit to not wearing it once in the past year. However, the current MVOSS iteration differs from previous ones in that it was conducted via web/mail, which may have diminished the effect of social desirability since respondents did not have to answer a person on the phone. Even so, and with assurances of confidentiality to minimize the effect, social desirability could affect the responses to many MVOSS questions.

Conclusion

This survey found that most people agreed with the utility of wearing seat belts. However, adults differ in their use, beliefs, and attitudes regarding aspects of belt use. Further uses of MVOSS can explore the statistical relationships among the 93 items to better understand belt use and build programs to promote use in all positions at all times.

How to Order

Download the final reports *2016 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey, Volumes #1 Methodology Report and #2 Seat Belt Report* prepared by ICF Macro International Inc. at www.nhtsa.gov.

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