



A Guide for Increasing Seat Belt Use NCHRP Report 500-11

One of a Series of Guides to Help States Improve Highway Safety

Seat Belts Could Save 7,000 More Lives Each Year

It is well documented that seat belts prevent death and reduce serious injury. Today they save an estimated 13,000 lives each year. Because safety belts are highly effective, getting the “unbelted” to use the restraints could save another 7,000 people annually.

The easy converts to restraints are already buckling up. Seat belt use in the United States is now approaching 80 percent, with statewide use rates ranging from a low of 55 percent in one northeastern state to 90 percent in some western states. Today’s challenge is to increase restraint use among those who have not yet accepted educational or enforcement messages...and the reality that seat belts save lives.

Data show that 58 percent of people who die in crashes are not belted. People with the highest crash risk—generally young male drivers—are also those with the lowest restraint use rates. Occupants of pickup trucks are among those least likely to buckle up.

The single most effective strategy for improving occupant restraint use rates is enactment of seat belt use primary enforcement laws in all states. Seat belt use laws by themselves are not sufficient to increase the use of safety belts. Nor are public education efforts alone, without an enforcement component, generally successful. The key is enactment of primary enforcement laws coupled with efforts to inform the public about the laws and that they will be enforced.

Another significant challenge is assuring the proper use of child restraints. Although use rates exceed 90 percent, in 6 out of 10 cases the restraints are improperly secured to the vehicle or the child is improperly secured in the restraint. One study showed 85 percent misuse.

Recognizing that a combination of enforcement and public information campaigns appear to be the key to achieving meaningful, lasting increases in restraint use, this guide focuses on strategies that enable primarily local and regional entities, as well as entire states, to implement programs to increase use of restraints and to assure that those systems are properly used.

Representative Countermeasures

- ✓ **Maximize use of occupant restraints by all vehicle occupants:** Conduct highly publicized enforcement



campaigns to maximize restraint use; provide enhanced public education to population groups with lower than average restraint use rates; and encourage the enactment of local laws that will permit standard enforcement of restraint laws.

- ✓ **Ensure that restraints, especially child and infant restraints, are properly used:** Provide community locations for instruction in proper child restraint use, including both public safety agencies and health care providers, that are almost always available; conduct high profile “child restraint inspection” events at multiple community locations; and train law



enforcement personnel to check for proper child restraint use in all motorist encounters.

✓ **Provide access to appropriate information, materials and guidelines for those implementing programs to increase occupant restraint use:**

Create state-level clearing houses for materials that offer guidance in implementing programs to increase restraint use.

✓ **Related strategies:** Public information programs, better enforcement of traffic laws, improved EMS and

trauma systems, improving safety management systems, and strategies detailed in other emphasis area guides.

How the Implementation Guide Helps You

The guide lists practical countermeasure strategies categorized by relative cost to implement. Many of these strategies have been formally evaluated to demonstrate effectiveness. Other strategies lack formal evaluation, but have been implemented with promising results.

The guide lays out the technical attributes of each countermeasure strategy in detail: target audience, expected effectiveness, keys to success, potential difficulties, appropriate measures and data, and associated need for support services.

The guide discusses organizational, institutional, and policy issues; issues affecting implementation time; costs involved; training and other personnel needs; and legislative needs (if any).

Web-Based Support for More Information

Backing up the guide is a series of appendixes and exhibits developed specifically to provide in-depth information useful to anyone implementing this part of the Strategic Highway Safety Plan, together with a collection of general knowledge sharing documents providing background, data, and information of significant value to state and local implementers.

This guide is one in a series developed to assist states in their efforts to improve highway safety. Copies of the plan, the guides, the Integrated Safety Management System, the Self-Assessment Tool, and related documents, may be obtained on the Internet at <http://safety.transportation.org>.



Printed copies of the guides and the Integrated Safety Management Process can be obtained from:

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Implementing the AASHTO Strategic Highway Safety Plan