

POLICY  
IMPACT

# SEAT BELTS

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control  
Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention



**FASTEN  
SAFETY  
BELTS  
STATE LAW**



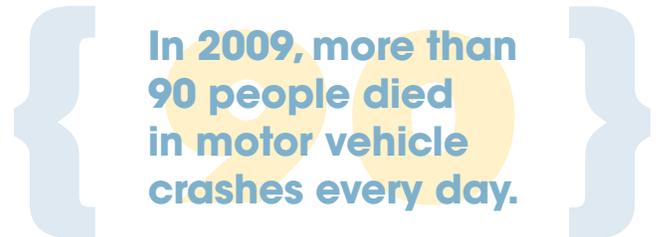
## WHAT'S THE ISSUE?

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death in the first three decades of American's lives. In 2009 alone, crashes killed over 33,000 people and injured another 2.2 million—more than 70% of these were in passenger vehicles and trucks.<sup>1</sup>

More than half of the people killed in car crashes were not restrained at the time of the crash.<sup>1</sup> Wearing a seat belt is the most effective way to prevent death and serious injury in a crash.

Seat belt use is on the rise. Laws, education, and technology have increased seat belt use from 11% in 1981<sup>2</sup> to nearly 85% in 2010<sup>3</sup>, saving hundreds of thousands of lives. Yet, about 1 in 7 people still don't buckle up.

There are proven policies to increase seat belt use and save lives.



**In 2009, more than  
90 people died  
in motor vehicle  
crashes every day.**

## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

**Most drivers and passengers killed in crashes are unrestrained.** 53% of drivers and passengers killed in car crashes in 2009 were not wearing restraints.<sup>1</sup>

**Seat belts dramatically reduce risk of death and serious injury.** Among drivers and front-seat passengers, seat belts reduce the risk of death by 45%, and cut the risk of serious injury by 50%.<sup>4</sup>

**Seat belts prevent drivers and passengers from being ejected during a crash.** People not wearing a seat belt are 30 times more likely to be ejected from a vehicle during a crash. More than 3 out of 4 people who are ejected during a crash die from their injuries.<sup>5</sup>

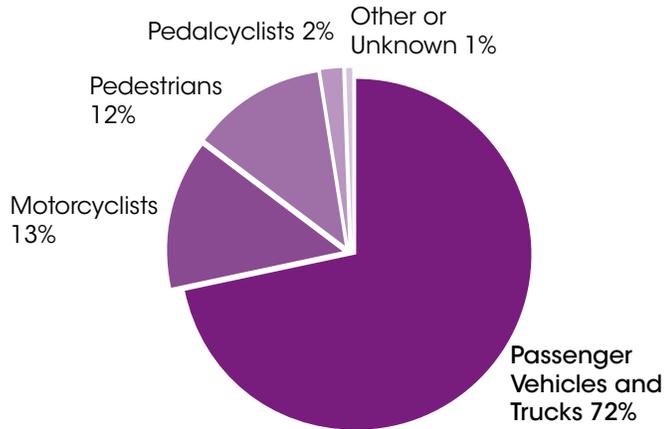
**Seat belts save thousands of lives each year, and increasing use would save thousands more.** Seat belts saved almost 13,000 lives in 2009. If all drivers and passengers had worn seat belts that year, almost 4,000 more people would be alive today.<sup>5</sup>

These facts show that increasing seat belt use is critical to reduce injury and save lives.

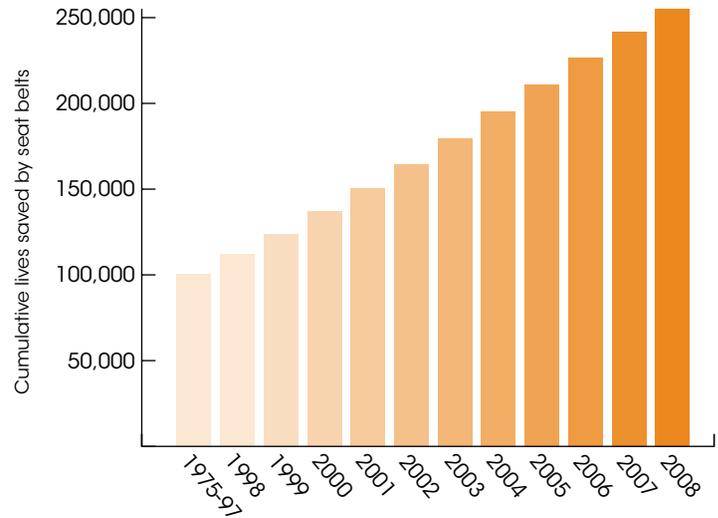


**In one year alone, crash deaths and injuries to drivers and passengers cost \$70 billion in medical and lost work costs.<sup>6</sup>**

### Most people killed in crashes are drivers or passengers<sup>1</sup>



### Seat belts have saved an estimated 255,000 lives since 1975<sup>7</sup>



## WHAT CAN WE DO?

Seat belts protect people from needless death and injury. But whether it is because they are in a hurry, distracted, or they simply forget, many people don't wear their seat belts, and thousands die as a result. CDC recommends effective, well-enforced seat belt laws to ensure that every person in every seat buckles up on every trip.



**Primary enforcement states have seat belt use 9 percentage points higher than secondary states.**

## CDC RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Primary enforcement seat belt laws**

Laws requiring seat belt use are either “primary” or “secondary” enforcement laws. Primary enforcement laws allow police officers to pull over drivers and issue tickets just because the drivers—or their passengers—aren't wearing seat belts. Secondary enforcement laws only allow police officers to issue tickets for seat belt violations if drivers have been pulled over for some other offense.

Secondary enforcement significantly limits the ability of officers to enforce seat belt laws. Rates of seat belt use are 9 percentage points higher in primary enforcement states than secondary states.<sup>8</sup>

If the overall prevalence of seat belt use in states with secondary enforcement laws had matched the higher prevalence in states with primary laws, an additional 7.3 million adults would have buckled up in 2008.<sup>8</sup> Increasing the number of states with primary enforcement seat belt laws covering all positions will increase seat belt use and save lives.

### **Enhanced enforcement of existing seat belt laws**

“Enhanced enforcement” programs seek to better support seat belt laws by either increasing the average number of citations each officer issues or by increasing the number of officers on patrol. These measures are supported by publicity campaigns, like the successful “Click It or Ticket” initiative.

Research has shown that enhanced enforcement programs increase seat belt use by a median of 16 percentage points.<sup>9</sup> Communities that follow this model and implement these programs will increase seat belt use.

### **Increased fines for seat belt violations**

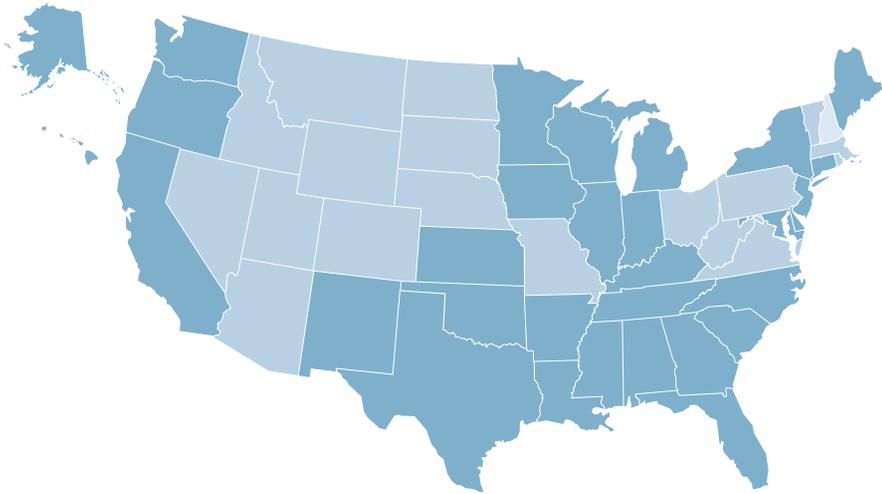
Well-enforced seat belt laws work because most people would rather buckle up than possibly pay a fine. But in many states, fines for violating seat belt laws are so small that they don’t motivate people to wear their seat belt.

Increasing a seat belt fine from \$5 to \$100 can increase seat belt use by more than 10 percentage points. Even a modest increase can make a difference—for instance, an increase from \$25 to \$60 can increase belt use by 3 to 4 percentage points.<sup>10</sup>

States should consider increasing fines to a level that will encourage seat belt use.



**Enhanced enforcement  
increases seat belt  
use by a median of  
16 percentage points.**



## Nineteen states still lack a primary enforcement seat belt law

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety maintains current information about state laws, who they cover, and fines. For information on seat belt laws in your state visit [www.iihs.org/laws/SafetyBeltUse.aspx](http://www.iihs.org/laws/SafetyBeltUse.aspx).



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## POLICY IMPACT

Policy Impact is a series of issue briefs from CDC's Injury Center highlighting key public health issues and important, science-based policy actions that can be taken to address them.

For more information on Seat Belts, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:  
[www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety](http://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety) • [cdcinfo@cdc.gov](mailto:cdcinfo@cdc.gov) • 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4643) | TTY 1-888-232-6348

For references, visit: [www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbeltbrief](http://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/seatbeltbrief)

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