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2003 MOTOR VEHICLE OCCUPANT SAFETY SURVEY (MVOSS) GIVES STATUS REPORT ON ATTITUDES AND SUPPORT FOR SAFETY BELT USE

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducts a national telephone survey every two years to monitor the public's attitudes about safety belts, child restraints, reasons for their use or non-use, knowledge of safety belt laws, experience with law enforcement, and attitudes about risk perception. The 2003 MVOSS consisted of two questionnaires, each given to a randomly selected sample of about 6,000 persons age 16 and older, with younger ages oversampled. Interviewing ran from January 8, 2003 through March 30, 2003. This was a slight adjustment from previous administrations of the survey, which typically ran from November into January. Thus there is no 2002 MVOSS but rather a 2003 MVOSS, although the time span between the 2003 MVOSS and preceding 2000 MVOSS is still approximately two years.

Safety Belt Use When Driving

- More than four-fifths (84%) of drivers said they used their safety belt *all the time* when driving, which was little changed from the percentage obtained two years earlier (83%). Among those whose belt systems did not have an automatic component, *all the time* use was lowest among those with lap systems only (64%) and highest for those with one-piece lap and shoulder systems (84%). For two-piece belt systems, drivers were much more likely to use their lap belt *all the time* if the shoulder belt was manual (96%) rather than automatic (66%).
- *All the time* use was lower for males (79%), males in the heaviest weight quartile (74%), drivers ages 16-24 (79%), pickup truck drivers (71%), and drivers in rural areas (77%). Nearly the same proportion of Blacks (83%) as Whites (84%), but slightly more Hispanics (88%) than non-Hispanics (84%), reported *all the time* use.
- Seven percent of drivers who said they wore their belt *all the time* also said they had not worn their safety belt while driving in the past day or week. Seventy-one percent of most of the time users made the same admission. These findings are consistent with previous years.
- The survey showed continued penetration of adjustable shoulder belts into the vehicle fleet, with 52% of drivers now saying they had them, compared to 48% in 2000. If drivers used the adjustable feature (69%), they usually were able to make themselves more comfortable (93%). The percentage of drivers reporting *all the time* safety belt use was similar for drivers who did (86%) and did not (84%) have adjustable shoulder belts.
- About one-third of drivers (34%) said they at least sometimes drive as part of a job or business. More than half of these drivers (53%) believed their company had a policy requiring safety belt use when driving on the job. Drivers' reported safety belt use tended to be higher if they thought their company had a safety belt policy.

Reasons for Use and Non-Use

- Safety remained the foremost reason that drivers gave for wearing safety belts; 66% said that avoiding serious injury was their most important reason for using belts
- There was no change from previous years in the two reasons that drivers said were most responsible for the times they did not wear safety belts; they forgot to put the safety belt on (25%) or they were only going a short distance (23%). These two reasons were characteristic of part time safety belt users, who substantially outnumbered drivers who rarely or never wore their belts. The primary reasons for non-use among rarely or never drivers included discomfort, not wanting to be told what to do, concerns about safety belts being dangerous, absence of habit, and the simple claim that they just did not feel like wearing them.

Attitudes About the Usefulness of Safety Belts

- The vast majority of the public (95%) strongly (88%) or somewhat (7%) agreed with the statement "If I were in an accident, I would want to have my seat belt on."
- More than one-third of the public (35%) either strongly (14%) or somewhat (21%) agreed with the statement "Seat belts are just as likely to harm you as help you." As reported belt use increased, agreement with this statement decreased.
- The fatalistic belief that wearing safety belts did not matter because "if it is your time to die, you'll die" was more prevalent among drivers who reported lower levels of safety belt use (23% among *all the time* users, 29% among *most of the time* users, 47% among *some of the time* users, and 59% among *rare/never* users). Blacks (39%) and Hispanics (37%) were more likely to agree with this statement than Whites (23%) and non-Hispanics (25%).

Safety Belt Laws And Their Enforcement

- Almost nine-in-ten persons (88%) favored laws that required drivers and front seat passengers to wear safety belts, similar to the 87% figure obtained by the 2000 MVOSS. Most (64%) also believed that police should be allowed to stop a vehicle if they see a safety belt violation when no other traffic laws are being broken, a three percentage point gain from two years earlier. The proportion of drivers who reported wearing safety belts *all the time* was higher in States where police had this authority (89%) than States where they did not (81%).
- Fewer than half of drivers (46%) considered it likely that they would be ticketed if they did not wear their safety belt at all while driving over the next six months, although a 4 percentage point increase from the 2000 MVOSS. Blacks (57%) and Hispanics (64%) were more likely than Whites (42%) and non-Hispanics (44%) to believe they likely would be ticketed. However, they also tended to show a higher level of support for safety belt laws and their enforcement compared to Whites and non-Hispanics.

How To Order

For a copy of *2003 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey (Volume I: Methodology Report; Volume II: Safety Belt Report)* write to the Office of Research and Technology, NHTSA, NTI-130, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590 or send a fax to (202) 366-7096 or download from www.nhtsa.dot.gov.

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