

INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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PRIMARY SAFETY BELT LAWS WOULD SAVE 700 LIVES PER YEAR 28 STATES STILL ALLOW TICKET ONLY IF DRIVER IS STOPPED FOR ANOTHER REASON

ARLINGTON, VA — Safety belt use laws in only 21 states and the District of Columbia are primary, meaning police may stop vehicles solely for belt law violations. But in most states belt use law enforcement is secondary, so police cannot stop vehicles for this infraction alone (New Hampshire is the only state without a belt use law.) In a new study the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that when states strengthen their laws from secondary enforcement to primary, driver death rates decline by an estimated 7 percent.

"In states with primary laws, safety belt use rates are higher. The result is that crash deaths are reduced," says Institute senior vice president Susan Ferguson. "Where primary laws are in effect, drivers are more likely to buckle up because the perception is that they're going to be pulled over if they don't."

The most recent national observational survey conducted in 2004 by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration shows that belt use rates averaged 84 percent in primary states compared with 73 percent in secondary states. A number of observational studies have shown that shifting from secondary to primary laws boosts safety belt use, but the Institute's is the first study to evaluate the effect of this shift on traffic deaths.

The Institute examined driver fatality data during 1989-2003 in 10 jurisdictions — California, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Washington — where secondary laws were amended to primary. Researchers compared these data with data in states where the laws remained secondary.

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One indication that the primary laws led to higher belt use comes from rates among fatally injured drivers. In 1989 before any of the laws were changed, belt use rates among fatally injured drivers were similar — about 20 percent — in both groups of states. By 2003 the rates had risen to 47 percent in states that switched to primary laws, compared with 36 percent in the secondary states.

The annual rate of passenger vehicle driver deaths per mile of travel declined in both groups of states, but it declined more in the states that changed to primary enforcement. Taking into account the timing of the change in each state and other factors that could have affected crash rates, primary laws were associated with a 7 percent reduction in death rates.

Ferguson points out that during the study period “many states participated in special ‘Click It or Ticket’ safety belt enforcement campaigns. The enhanced enforcement began earlier in the primary states so it’s important to note that changes in belt use laws along with the increased enforcement led to the decrease in fatalities.”

Based on the reduction in driver death rates, it’s estimated that 2,990 lives have been saved in the study states because of the tougher safety belt laws.

“If the 28 states that still have secondary laws were to switch to primary enforcement, about 700 lives would be saved each year. And if legislators in these states had enacted primary laws to begin with, more than 5,000 lives could have been saved since 1996,” Ferguson says (see attached table).

**End of 2-page news release on primary vs. secondary safety belt use laws
Attachment: Effects of strengthening belt laws from secondary to primary**

For more information go to www.iihs.org

**Effects of strengthening safety belt laws:
 Lives that could have been saved in secondary
 states if belt laws had been primary**

State	Passenger vehicle driver deaths 1996-2003	Lives that could have been saved since 1996
Alaska	326	23
Arizona	3,347	234
Arkansas	2,914	204
Colorado	2,646	185
Florida	10,889	761
Idaho	1,158	81
Kansas	2,373	166
Kentucky	4,027	282
Maine	838	59
Massachusetts	1,776	124
Minnesota	2,771	194
Mississippi	4,314	302
Missouri	5,459	382
Montana	1,070	75
Nebraska	1,345	94
Nevada	1,226	89
North Dakota	465	33
Ohio	6,309	441
Pennsylvania	6,644	465
Rhode Island	336	23
South Carolina	4,436	310
South Dakota	699	49
Utah	1,216	85
Vermont	372	26
Virginia	4,200	294
West Virginia	1,759	123
Wisconsin	3,454	242
Wyoming	675	47
Total	77,084	5,390

Note: States listed are all those with secondary safety belt use laws.