

# Status Report

## Current Standard Justified

### NHTSA Finds Benefits From 5 MPH Bumpers

Bumpers built to meet the federal 5 mph standard provide greater net benefits to consumers than those that would satisfy only a 2.5 mph standard, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has decided after extensive testing and analysis.

Savings to consumers from the 5 mph standard as contrasted to a 2.5 mph standard would add up to about \$400 million a year, NHTSA declared.

Somewhat greater benefits are indicated by a 7.5 mph standard, NHTSA announced, adding that this conclusion was based on assumptions that made it "less reliable" than the 5 mph finding.

The NHTSA findings on bumper cost-effectiveness climaxed months of controversy, including Congressional hearings, that had brought the current Part 581 standard under attack. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 6, April 9, 1979.) The standard specifies bumpers for the 1979 model year that will meet a 5 mph barrier impact test and prevent damage to the car, with the exception of the bumpers themselves (and their attachment hardware). Starting with the 1980 models, the standard also requires that damage to the bumpers be held to a minimal level.

#### EARLIER QUESTIONS RESOLVED

NHTSA's report resolved a question that had been raised in the agency's preliminary study of the issue, published in February. In that preliminary analysis NHTSA had indicated that while there were significant cost savings from the 5 mph standard, those savings might be even greater with a 2.5 mph standard.

According to the new NHTSA report, however, the agency subsequently carried out a new analysis "based on new and substantially more accurate information" and on comments filed in response to the preliminary study. "Using the new information and correcting the methodological shortcomings in the earlier analysis," the agency reported, "the final assessment shows that 5.0 mph bumpers provide greater savings to the consumer than 2.5 mph bumpers.

"The February analysis showed that the net lifetime benefits of 2.5 mph bumpers were approximately \$77 greater than the net benefits of 5.0 mph bumpers, sales weighted by bumper type. [See table.] The revised analysis shows that the 5.0 mph bumpers produce approximately \$39 more in net benefits than the 2.5 bumper. The net benefit is the present value of the expected savings resulting principally from damage avoided as a result of improved bumpers less the cost increases associated with the purchase and use of improved bumpers."

The NHTSA findings are consistent with the results of a study transmitted by the Insurance Institute

*(Cont'd on page 2)*

**NHTSA Finds Benefits From 5 MPH Bumpers (Cont'd from page 1)**

for Highway Safety to the NHTSA docket. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 8, May 17, 1979.) In that study the Institute reported that analysis of 32 bumper designs for 1978 and 1979 automobiles indicated greater consumer net benefits for 5 mph bumpers compared with 2.5 mph bumpers. That study also indicated even greater benefits would be available from 7.5 mph bumpers.

In the full NHTSA report, published together with an executive summary, the agency detailed the many considerations that went into its assessment of bumper benefits, including increased replacement costs for improved bumpers, reductions in insurance costs, and the value of inconvenience avoided in terms of time saved by the more protective bumpers. The complete report and executive summary of the "Final Assessment of the Bumper Standard" are available from General Services Division, Room 4423, NHTSA, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

**NHTSA ASSESSMENT OF NET BENEFITS BY BUMPER TYPE**

BUMPERS	BENEFITS*	COSTS*	NET BENEFITS
Steel			
2.5 mph	193	60	133
5.0 mph	325	170	155
7.5 mph	438	272	166
Aluminum			
2.5 mph	186	- 25	211
5.0 mph	325	43	282
7.5 mph	438	165	273
Soft Face			
2.5 mph	177	29	148
5.0 mph	332	86	246
7.5 mph	457	203	254

\*Benefits and costs are calculated in terms of changes from the performance of a prestandard 1971-72 bumper. All values are in 1978 dollars.

**Trend To Lower Drinking Ages Is Reversing**

Concern over increased youth involvement in alcohol-related crashes – among other factors – is spurring a reversal of the recent trend toward lowering minimum drinking ages.

Eight states that reduced their minimum drinking ages to 18 in the early 1970's have recently raised them. And, according to data compiled by the U.S. Brewers Association and the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information (NCAI), another 14 states – 12 of which lowered minimum drinking age requirements in the 1970's – are considering proposals to raise them.

Support for lowered drinking age requirements grew strong among state legislators after the Constitution was amended in 1971 to give 18-year-olds the right to vote. According to the NCAI, a unit of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 27 states by mid-1976 had lowered the minimum drinking age for all alcoholic beverages, and another 11 had lowered it for wine and/or beer.

*(Cont'd on page 3)*

But support for the liberalized laws has weakened as they increasingly have been blamed for aggravating drinking-related problems. Critics have linked the lowering of drinking ages to increased youth involvement in alcohol-related crashes; to increases in juvenile crime, including rowdiness and vandalism; and to a “trickle-down” effect – more drinking by younger teenagers who obtain alcohol through their 18-year-old friends or by passing as 18-year-olds themselves.

A check by a spokesperson for the Distilled Spirits Council found that no states have lowered their drinking ages since 1976, although proposals to do so recently have been made in several states. Attempts to raise the drinking age have failed in several others, including Connecticut, whose legislature passed a bill to raise the drinking age that was later vetoed. But disenchantment with the 18-year-old minimum has prompted Iowa, Montana, Minnesota, and Tennessee to raise it to 19; Maine, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire to raise it to 20; and Michigan to 21.

According to the U.S. Brewers Association, proposals to raise minimum drinking age requirements are pending in the legislatures of the following states: Alabama, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

*(Cont'd on page 4)*

### ***Some Benefits Of Regulation***

In a recent speech before a consumer symposium, R. David Pittle, a member of the Consumer Product Safety Commission, addressed cost-benefit concerns over government regulation in these words:

“[W]hile a traditional cost-benefit ratio may be dispositive in the case of purely economic regulations, it is of questionable value in the area of health and safety regulations. The basic problem is that while the costs of a health or safety regulation generally can be measured with exactitude, its benefits cannot – although they can be easily understood and appreciated.

“Consider just a few examples of the benefits resulting from today’s health and safety regulations:

“(a) In the regulated product groups, safety packaging requirements have produced a 40 percent drop in ingestions of poisons by children over a four-year period. There are children who would not be alive today but for those regulations.

“(b) Since the safety standard for cribs became effective in 1974, crib deaths by strangulation have fallen by half and injuries by 45 percent.

“(c) According to the GAO (General Accounting Office), 28,000 lives were saved between 1966 and 1974 because of federal motor vehicle safety regulations. The same GAO report showed that in the one state where a detailed analysis was conducted, there was also a substantial reduction in the frequency and severity of injuries. With auto accidents the number one cause of paraplegia in the United States, these figures are quite significant.

“(d) The Shriners Burn Institute in Boston reported that in 1971 – prior to the children’s sleepwear standards – 34 percent of their flame burn injuries involved sleepwear. In 1977 the figure was 0.”

### **Trend To Lower Drinking Ages Is Reversing (Cont'd from page 3)**

In a 1977 review of research on the effects of lowered drinking ages, published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, Reginald G. Smart and Michael S. Goodstadt concluded that there “are usually greater increases in alcohol-related automobile accidents in areas where the purchasing age has been reduced than in comparison areas.”

In one study that compared areas with and without lowered drinking ages, completed by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) in 1974, researchers concluded that reducing the drinking age to 18 is a “social policy that carries a price in increased fatal motor vehicle collisions.” (See *Status Report*, Vol. 9, No. 7, April 9, 1974.)

In the Institute study, researchers compared the fatal crash involvement of drivers under 21 in Michigan, Ontario, and Wisconsin – where the drinking age was dropped from 21 to 18 – with that of similar drivers in nearby Indiana, Illinois, and Minnesota – where the drinking age was 21. They found a “significant increase in involvement in fatal crashes of drivers under 21 in areas that changed the law, particularly in nighttime and single-vehicle crashes where alcohol is most often involved.”

The researchers found evidence of a “trickle-down” effect, reporting that the increase “occurred not only among the 18-20 year-olds to whom the law change applied but also, though to a somewhat lesser degree, among 15-17 year-olds.” They estimated that in the year after the laws were changed, the number of 15- to 20-year-olds involved in fatal crashes who would not have been involved had the laws not changed was approximately 29 in Michigan, 28 in Ontario, and 13 in Wisconsin.

The study also concluded that the very large increases in youth involvement in alcohol-related fatal crashes reported in some areas after drinking ages were lowered may have stemmed in part from a change in police crash reporting. The Institute researchers said the increases found in their study were “not nearly as large” as the increases in alcohol-involved fatal crashes reported in some states, which were “based on at least partially subjective reports.” The lowered ages apparently “affected the perception and/or reporting of alcohol-involvement by the police more than it affected the fatal crash rate” in those areas, they concluded.

## **Safety Board Warns Against Van Hazards**

A National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) study has concluded that customized interiors of vans frequently contain equipment that can “often break loose and injure or kill van occupants.”

In a study of 18 low-to-moderate speed crashes involving 19 vans, the NTSB found that “some interior furnishings such as cabinets, refrigerators, and paneling were torn loose, partially or completely, from their van anchorage. In one case, a cabinet, with an icebox inside, broke loose at impact, and hurtled into the rear of the driver’s seat.”

The report explained that customized vans frequently contain sinks, television sets, bars, stoves, tables, refrigerators, beds, chairs, and paneling. These fixtures are attached through the use of plywood and other lumber, screws, nails, and glue, but “while this construction may be sufficient for off-road use,” the NTSB said, “it will usually fail in low-to-moderate speed crashes.” There are no standards or specifications as to how these items should be installed.

Since 1970, the NTSB reported, there has been a “three-fold increase in the use of multipurpose vans.” And in 1977 there were 740 reported fatalities in van crashes.

In addition to the problem of fixtures breaking loose in impacts, the board found other safety problems, including steering wheel assemblies. Van steering columns enter the body of the vehicle at a sharper angle than in cars, because there is less distance from the front of the vehicle to the front seating positions.

"The accident data from the board's investigations indicates that drivers are striking the steering wheels and columns at a wide variety of angles, many of which are different from those experienced in passenger cars," the NTSB said. Because of the differences, the board urged the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to postpone extension of the current automobile steering assembly standards to multi-purpose vans, until more crash data can be gathered.

Last November, NHTSA initiated rulemaking procedures to extend occupant safety standards 201, 203, and 204, requiring energy-absorbing steering assemblies and interior padding, to light trucks and vans. In its announcement, NHTSA said it would delay rulemaking on improved compliance test procedures for energy-absorbing steering assemblies under FMVSS 203, in order to speed up the extension of the safety standards to light trucks and vans. That delay was criticized by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 4, March 8, 1979.)

In addition, the NTSB found that 10 of the 19 vans "did not retain their windshields on impact," resulting in the ejection of five occupants. While there is a federal safety standard requiring windshield retention in most motor vehicles, "forward control" vehicles are exempted. ("Forward control" means a configuration in which more than half of the engine is behind the windshield and the steering wheel hub is in the forward quarter of the vehicle.)

*(Cont'd on page 6)*

## ***Gas Cans Can Be 'Dynamite' In The Trunk***

Carrying or storing gasoline in a portable container in the trunk of a car is like "riding around with dynamite that can explode at any time," the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has warned.

The explosive power of a gallon of the fuel has been compared to that of 14 sticks of dynamite, NHTSA said in an advisory to consumers.

"We have an extremely dangerous situation developing," NHTSA administrator Joan Claybrook said in the advisory. Concern over the availability of gasoline is prompting an increasing number of people to store the fuel in their homes and cars, NHTSA said, reporting that its inquiries show that the recent sale and production of gasoline cans has risen by as much as 100 percent.

"Even a minor rear-end collision or a spark from a short in a tail light or brake light could set off an inferno resulting in injury or death," Claybrook said. The advisory explained that gasoline vapors "expand and can split the seams of an unvented can or plastic container," and that the expansion can even "cause vapor leakage from a vented 'safety' can."

"Storage of gasoline in portable containers in the car or around the home always involves a high degree of risk," Claybrook said. "We strongly advise consumers to avoid carrying or storing fuel in such a manner."

NHTSA said motorists should consider transporting fuel "only in the most extreme emergencies." The container used "should be rugged, securely closed but vented, and protected against accidental spillage or damage," it advised. The agency cautioned that glass and plastic containers are especially hazardous, and said rusted metal containers also should be avoided. Stored gasoline should be kept out of the reach of children and in a well-ventilated area away from any flame sources, it added.

### **Safety Board Warns Against Van Hazards (Cont'd from page 5)**

The NTSB urged that the rule be extended and that “all vans should be subject to the same requirements for occupant protection as passenger cars.”

Other problems included the installation of “captain’s chairs,” high-back swivel chairs mounted in front seat positions. One postcrash inspection revealed “that at impact, both seatbacks collapsed rearward more than 45 degrees, and the driver sustained a cerebral concussion from striking an interior cabinet.”

#### **SEAT BELTS NOT USED**

Out of a total of 64 occupants involved in the 19 vans studied, only one occupant – a baby – was restrained by a belt. Although no standard restraints were available for rear passengers the total lack of use of available manual restraints by front seat occupants prompted the NTSB to urge NHTSA to consider the mandatory installation of automatic restraints, which require no attachment action by occupants.

Another problem, jammed doors in 20 percent of the cases studied, caused the board to recommend to NHTSA that such problems be studied, to see if “corrective action” is needed.

The NTSB recommended that the Recreation Vehicle Industry Association step up efforts to determine the best methods for securing appliances and furnishings in van interiors, and seek to amend the standard for recreational vehicles “to specify those methods.”

Additional recommendations to NHTSA included the following:

- An instruction to study the problems of custom high back seats to see whether there is a significant injury problem which would necessitate rulemaking.
- Rulemaking action on the federal standard covering door locks and retention, to add a requirement for a locking mechanism on cargo-type doors that can be operated from the interior of the van.
- Intensification of its study “to explore the feasibility of extending the passive [automatic] restraint requirements” to vans.
- A study of the “feasibility” of extending current windshield retention requirements to all vans.
- The inclusion in “its exploratory rulemaking and research activity, control of crash aggressiveness of vans in relation to other vehicles.”

Single copies of the study are available at no charge, from the publications branch of the National Transportation Safety Board, Washington, D.C. 20594. Additional copies may be purchased from the National Technical Information Service, U.S. Department of Commerce, Springfield, Va. 22151.

#### **CORRECTION**

The caption for Figure 1 with the report on an IIHS study of 32 bumper designs in *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 8, May 17, 1979, should have read as follows: “Front and rear center impacts requiring bumper face bar replacements as a percentage of all damaged cars reported to State Farm.”

## **House Committee Endorses Automatic Restraints**

The House Commerce Committee, rejecting a minority attack on air bags, has strongly endorsed the Department of Transportation requirement for automatic restraints in all new cars by the 1984 model year.

The committee's action came in a report on legislation authorizing motor vehicle and highway safety program appropriations for the next two years. The report noted that since enactment of federal safety programs in 1966, highway traffic deaths and injuries had decreased significantly. By 1977, the committee pointed out, the highway fatality rate per 100 million miles of travel had dropped 42 percent, from 5.6 to 3.19.

"Now, however, it appears that this downward trend is once again reversing itself," the committee reported. "The fatality toll in 1978 reached over 50,000 for the first time in five years, and in the first two months of 1979 increased more than 16 percent over the corresponding 1978 period."

Implementation of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 208, the occupant restraint standard requiring automatic restraints in some new cars in 1982 models, is "one of the more important activities the agency is engaged in," the committee reported.

### **'THERE IS AMPLE REAL-WORLD EVIDENCE'**

"According to NHTSA statistics, the Passive [Automatic] Restraint Standard will ultimately save an estimated 9,000 lives, and prevent many more serious injuries each year," the committee observed. "While these are only estimates, there is ample real-world evidence and test data to support these conclusions."

The committee, chaired by Rep. Harley O. Staggers (D.-W.Va.), authorized appropriations of \$48.5 million for fiscal year 1980 and \$52.5 million for fiscal year 1981 for the safety programs. These include

*(Cont'd on page 8)*

## ***Congressmen Renew Protest Over GAO Inquiry***

Members of the House Commerce Committee who last December protested an unannounced General Accounting Office (GAO) inquiry into the automatic restraint decision have renewed their concerns in a letter to the Comptroller General, who heads the GAO.

The 15 Congressmen who signed the earlier protest (see *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Jan. 9, 1979) said they had learned of a draft report of the GAO study now being circulated for comment. They wrote:

"Inasmuch as we have not been made privy to the contents of the draft report, we can only remind you of our concerns as expressed at the end of last year, and ask again that you insure that all aspects of this important standard be examined carefully. Such an examination, as we indicated previously and as you acknowledged in your response to us, should include an accounting of the benefits likely to accrue from the standard. One of the chief maladies of the present concern over 'cost benefit' analysis, which can be a very important tool in decision-making, has been the tendency to overemphasize the costs and minimize or even ignore the benefits on the ground that they are more difficult to quantify. This tendency is of great concern to us, and we sincerely hope that the GAO report does not subscribe to that fallacious reasoning."

### **House Committee Endorses Automatic Restraints (Cont'd from page 7)**

vehicle safety research, development of new vehicle safety standards, amendment of existing standards, and consumer protection programs established under the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act of 1972.

Only 8 of the 42 members of the committee signed a minority statement charging the automatic restraint decision was “both premature and unwise.”

The minority statement urged a return to the program proclaimed by former Transportation Secretary William T. Coleman which would have established a demonstration of air bag effectiveness before being required as standard equipment in new cars.

The full committee report said that manual restraints are “equally effective” with automatic restraints when used. However, the report also noted “latest statistics indicate that no more than 14 percent of the public uses active (manual) seat belts. Because manual belts are usually not worn, their effectiveness is less than 5 percent.”

## **Safety Board Urges Speed Limits For Ambulances**

Calling state laws “too general,” the National Transportation Safety Board has urged that the Uniform Vehicle Code be modified to set maximum speed limits for ambulances of no more than 10 mph above the posted limits set for streets and highways.

The board also urged that factors such as patient condition, driver ability, and road conditions be carefully considered before a decision is made to exceed posted limits.

The recommendation was issued in a final report on a fatal high-speed rollover crash of an ambulance that failed to negotiate a curve on a hilly New Hampshire road last August. Earlier this year, in connection with the same crash, the board had recommended to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) that ambulance drivers receive high-speed driver training. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 6, April 9, 1979.)

In the final report, the crash was attributed to oversteer characteristics of the vehicle and the driver's lack of high-speed driver training.

The board called on NHTSA and the General Services Administration to improve emergency vehicle crashworthiness and handling characteristics.

For a copy of “Highway Accident Report: Overturn of Ross Ambulance Service Ambulance, State Rt. 116, Littleton, N.H., Aug. 22, 1978,” write the Publications Branch, National Transportation Safety Board, Washington, D.C. 20594.

### **UPDATE . . .**

**HELMET LAW REPEAL:** Despite a telegram from Joan Claybrook, chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and letters from the Maryland Department of Transportation, the Maryland State Department of Health, and the Maryland State Police urging him to use his veto powers, Maryland Governor Harry Hughes recently signed a controversial motorcycle helmet bill requiring only those riders under 18 years old to wear protective headgear. The law goes into effect July 1, 1979. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 7, April 30, 1979.)

© 1979, The Washington Post Company. Reprinted with permission.

Colman McCarthy

## 'Crime Waves On the Roadways'

Life on the highways is back to being cheap again. Last week, the Department of Transportation reported that traffic deaths topped 50,000 in 1978, the highest kill-rate since the imposition of the 55 miles per hour limit in 1974. Federal officials said that following a brief slowdown, speed-fever again pushed up the death toll.

In the West and Southwest, where flooring it to 70, 80 and 90 mph is almost a religious act in worship of the great open spaces, the gore jumped 28 percent between 1975 and 1978. The statistics reveal the blood-red truth of how the laws of the highway mix with the laws of mortality: the faster you go, the more likely you will go.

With the country's momentary fling with safety and sanity now over—even then, the 55 mph limit was initially imposed to save fuel, not lives—any future effort to reduce the carnage must move beyond the useless "please drive safely" approach.

The crime wave on the roadways—to violate the 55 mph limit is a criminal act—will never be stopped until the speed limit is imposed on the vehicle, not the operator. If drivers won't slow down, as the nation's police and morticians know better than anyone, then slow down the cars.

At first, the notion of vehicles with engines designed for a top speed of 55 mph seems only a dream that Ralph Nader might have on the best of days. It hasn't been possible even to get automobile companies to install bumpers with more toughness than French pastry.

But with the Department of Transportation now talking about "redesigning the automobile" and creating cars that are "socially responsible," it is the pragmatists, not the dreamers, who are coming forward.

Kevin J. Murphy, the president of Continental Trailways, recently asked the federal government to require 55 mph governors on all interstate commercial vehicles. Although the lead-foots of Murphy's own company groused about the idea, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is currently seeking public comment on the proposed rule.

Governors are useful but they are still little more than check-reins on wild horses. The corrals of Detroit were on the mind of William Haddon, M.D., the former federal safety official who is the head of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. At a conference on advanced automotive technology, Had-

don said: "... It is imperative that we as a nation decide that the built-in top speeds of vehicles about to be planned for the 1985-2000 period be lowered to a speed close to the present national speed limit. Needless to say, as an engineering matter this has been inexpensively and entirely feasible for at least a decade using approaches that in no way interfere with performance at lower speeds."

If Haddon's thinking—intelligent and humane—sounds strange, it is because the ears of the public are dinned with the hype of Detroit's speed message. Television commercials, picturing cars on test tracks in high-speed "performance drills," suggest that all of America is now the Bonneville Flats.

As victims of this speed promotion,

---

*"If drivers won't slow down, as the nation's police and morticians know better than anyone, then slow down the cars."*

---

safety-conscious citizens lose several ways. They risk being killed by the maniac-criminals going over 55, they are paying for horsepower they don't want, they are forced to pay higher taxes for police departments that must waste their time on speeders rather than social menaces, they risk losing family members—especially teen-aged drivers—in high-speed crashes.

This isn't the first time that rational thoughts of safe-speed vehicles have surfaced. In 1971, NHTSA proposed design controls. But three out of four of the American car makers opposed them, with the fourth (GM) raising the standard specter of "higher costs." Fiat of Italy, twisting logic like spaghetti, said slow driving is hazardous because "alertness drops dangerously when traveling becomes tedious."

That argument, and others of stupefying crassness, carried the day. Since then, about 400,000 Americans have died in traffic, with some 5 million seriously injured. As the most abused machine of the 20th century, the automobile with built-in speed assures more built-in death.

## **Surprise Truck Check Reveals Widespread Safety Violations**

An unannounced safety check of commercial trucks by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has revealed widespread evidence of significant safety violations and hazards, the agency has reported.

In five states along the Mississippi River, FHWA special agents, Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety (BMCS) inspectors, and state law enforcement authorities inspected 1,731 trucks on a random sampling basis from sunrise on May 14 to noon, May 18. Out of those, 753 or 44 percent were placed out of service for violations ranging from unsafe brakes to worn-out tires and malfunctioning lights.

Forty-one drivers were also grounded by inspectors for violating federal hours-of-service work rules and other regulations.

The trucks were stopped in Wisconsin, Illinois, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana to be examined for compliance with federal regulations covering safety standards for trucks, driver qualifications, and the movement of hazardous materials.

Karl Bowers, FHWA administrator, said the inspection “is part of our continuing campaign to get unsafe trucks and buses off our highways. Similar inspections will continue to be held in all parts of the country.”

Another inspection in Berwick, Pa., last year resulted in 52 percent of interstate commercial vehicles being placed out of service for safety violations (see *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 14, Oct. 11, 1978).

## **Virginians Favor Automatic Restraints**

Fifty-four percent of 2,000 people surveyed in a telephone poll by the Virginia Highway and Transportation Research Council have said they feel the government should require manufacturers to equip all new cars with automatic restraints. Fifty-six percent said they would purchase air bags or automatic safety belts in their next car if the cost were around \$200.

In contrast, only 33 percent of those polled would favor mandatory seat belt use legislation.

The survey also revealed that 93 percent agreed with a Virginia law mandating the use of helmets for motorcyclists. Of those who rode motorcycles, 76 percent also felt helmets should be required. This was particularly noteworthy since the legislature has turned back attempts to repeal the law during the last two sessions.

In a six-week survey conducted during October and November of 1978, Virginians were asked about their attitudes toward transportation safety. The council said half the respondents were women. More than 90 percent were drivers, of whom 80 percent had been driving for at least five years. About 96 percent were over 18.

### **55 MPH SPEED LIMIT SUPPORTED**

“There has been considerable controversy concerning the 55 mph speed limit, not only in terms of increasing speed limits beyond 55, but also in terms of unusual methods of surveillance and enforcement,” said John T. Hanna, director of the Virginia Department of Transportation Safety. “We were pleased to learn from the survey that a majority (74 percent) of Virginians still favor the maintenance of the 55 mph speed limit.”

*(Cont'd on page 11)*

However, attitudes about radar detectors appeared to be almost evenly split, with 49 percent indicating that they should be illegal but 59 percent saying they should not be confiscated by police. Nearly 67 percent opposed the mandatory use of speed governors to keep all vehicles from exceeding the 55 mph limit.

Fifty-three percent of those surveyed said they favor keeping the minimum age for beer drinking at 18, but only 39 percent said 18-year-olds should be legally able to drink wine. Forty-two percent said the legal drinking age for wine should remain at 21.

### **REPEAT DWI OFFENDERS SHOULD LOSE LICENSES**

While 80 percent of the respondents agreed that drivers convicted of drunk driving for the first time could benefit from an alcohol treatment program, 50 percent said that first-time offenders should be restricted to driving only to and from work, and 74 percent said repeat offenders should automatically lose their licenses.

Eighty-five percent agreed with a current Virginia requirement that most vehicles be inspected for defects once every six months.

Copies of the survey report may be obtained from the Virginia Department of Transportation Safety, 300 Turner Rd., Richmond, Va. 23225.

## **NHTSA Withdraws Maverick, Comet Defect Finding**

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has withdrawn an initial finding announced in April that the fuel systems of 1970-73 Mavericks and 1971-73 Mercury Comets are defective. Saying that questionable crash test procedures had been followed in the NHTSA inquiry that led to the defect finding, the agency announced it will conduct new tests of the vehicles, an estimated 974,000 of which are currently in use.

In the initial finding the agency said that when the Ford Motor Co. vehicles are struck from the rear, their fuel systems are "subject to failure, rupture, and dislodgment which can result in fuel leakage, fires, injuries, deaths, and property damage." (See *Status Report*, Vol. 14, No. 8, May 17, 1979.) It said it had received reports of "at least 26 rear-impact collisions with fuel spillage and fire, resulting in at least 31 fatalities and 19 injuries to occupants" of the Mavericks and Comets.

In addition, NHTSA said that in five crash tests in which 1973 Mavericks were struck from the rear, two tests resulted in fires. Test results released by the agency showed that after the remaining three crashes, fuel leakage rates ranged from 6 to 100 ounces per minute.

But in announcing new tests and the withdrawal of the initial finding, NHTSA said it has evidence that "the Mavericks whose fuel systems failed during the investigative crash testing had previously undergone major repairs," and that therefore their fuel systems "might not have been in their original configuration."

As part of its continuing investigation, NHTSA asked owners "who have experienced fires in the fuel systems of 1970-73 Mavericks and 1971-73 Comets to provide the agency with a full description of the incident." The information is "vital to public safety," it said.

A public hearing on the initial finding, scheduled for May 29 and later rescheduled for July 13, has been canceled.

## On The Inside

- **CONSUMER SAVINGS** are greater with 5 mph bumpers than with 2.5 mph bumpers, NHTSA decides after testing and analysis. . . . Page 1
- **MINIMUM DRINKING AGES** are tending to go higher in several states after the earlier trend toward lowering the legal age. . . . Page 2
- **BENEFITS OF REGULATION** are cited in a recent speech by R. David Pittle of the Consumer Product Safety Commission. . . . Page 3
- **CUSTOMIZED VANS** frequently contain furnishings that may break loose and be a crash hazard, a NTSB study says. . . . Page 4
- **STORING GASOLINE** in the trunk of a car is like carrying around a supply of dynamite, NHTSA warns. . . . Page 5
- **AUTOMATIC RESTRAINTS** get a strong endorsement from the House Commerce Committee, which rejected a minority attack on air bags. . . . Page 7
- **HOUSE COMMERCE COMMITTEE** members again protest to the General Accounting Office a planned report on automatic restraints. . . . Page 7
- **AMBULANCE SPEED LIMITS** of no more than 10 mph above regular limits are suggested by NTSB after a crash study. . . . Page 8
- **UPDATE:** Maryland governor signs into law motorcycle helmet repeal legislation passed at recent session of legislature. . . . Page 8
- **REPRINT:** From the *Washington (D.C.) Post*, a thought-provoking commentary on some of the problems of speed on the highways. . . . Page 9
- **A SURPRISE CHECK** of commercial trucks on highways in the Midwest reveals evidence of many safety violations. . . . Page 10
- **A VIRGINIA POLL** indicates a majority of residents favor required installation of automatic restraints in new cars. . . . Page 10
- **NHTSA WITHDRAWS** an initial finding of fuel system defects in 1970-73 Mavericks and 1971-73 Mercury Comets. . . . Page 11

(Contents may be republished whole, or in part, with attribution.)

insurance  
institute  
for  
highway  
safety

the highway loss reduction

# Status Report

Watergate 600 • Washington, D.C. 20037 • 202/333-0770

Editor: Paul C. Hood

Writers in this issue: John Reichard, Rea Tyler

Production: Sharon Brokaw, Robin McManus

ISSN 0018-988X

IIHS MASTER FILE COPY