

**Survey of New Car Buyers**

**Susan Ferguson**

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INSURANCE  
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1005 N. GLEBE ROAD, ARLINGTON, VA 22201 (703) 247-1500

## ABSTRACT

Prospective new car buyers were surveyed regarding the influence of safety and other features on their purchase decisions. Four hundred drivers, age 21 years or older, were identified from a random nationwide sample. The indications from the survey are that safety is a very important consideration when buying a new car. Fifty-two percent reported that safety is now more important than when they bought their last car, compared with 36 percent for performance and handling, and 16 percent who said styling was now more important. When asked to indicate what features they were looking for in a new car, about 20 percent spontaneously mentioned both air bags and power features. Safety ranked second behind quality as a very important feature, and when asked to rate the importance of specific safety features driver side air bags were the most highly rated feature followed by antilock brakes. As has been found in other surveys, women rated safety features more highly than men.

## INTRODUCTION

During most of the history of automobile transportation manufacturers did little to advertise or promote passenger car safety, believing that consumers preferred to choose cars on the basis of other criteria. During the 1950s the notion that safety doesn't sell became firmly entrenched among domestic car makers. Also during that period few safety regulations existed, and safety was not a predominant issue. Since then many states have adopted laws that mandate safe driving practices. Laws are now in existence that mandate the wearing of seat belts, that require children to be restrained in infant carriers, that require motorcyclists to wear helmets, and that define it as a crime to drive with a blood alcohol concentration above a prescribed threshold.

Complementing this rising tide of state laws, Federal safety regulations, which began in the late 1960s, have continued to establish safety standards that all new cars must meet.

Air bags are currently being phased in for passenger vehicles; by the 1998 model year all new cars and by the 1999 model year all new vans and utility vehicles must be equipped with driver and front passenger air bags. Recent news stories about people who owe their survival in severe crashes to their car's air bags, coupled with manufacturers' realization that air bags, in particular, and safety, in general, does sell, have fueled consumer interest in safety devices. As a result, manufacturers are now offering and advertising an increasing range of safety devices, such as passenger air bags, side impact protection, antilock brakes, and built-in child safety seats.

In April 1990, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety surveyed new car dealers in the Washington, D.C. area to determine their perceptions of customers' views on safety's importance. Sixty-eight percent of the dealers reported that safety is an important consideration for new car buyers, and 53 percent said air bags are the safety feature most important to customers (IIHS, 1990). A survey by the Insurance Research Council reported that not only was safety rated more highly than any other factor in the decision on which car to purchase, but it had increased in importance in recent years (Public Attitude Monitor, 1990). Sixty-eight percent of respondents in the survey rated the degree to which a car protects people from injury in crashes as a very important factor in their decision to buy a new car, compared with only 59 percent in 1982.

To determine how potential new car buyers view safety overall, as well as the influence of particular features on their purchase decisions, a national survey was conducted in March 1992.

## METHOD

A telephone survey of prospective new car buyers was conducted evenings and weekends during the month of March by ICR Survey

Research Group, a division of AUS Consultants. Respondents were screened from a national probability sample generated from random digit dialing. Telephone numbers were computer generated and accessed directly by an on-line computer from which the survey was conducted.

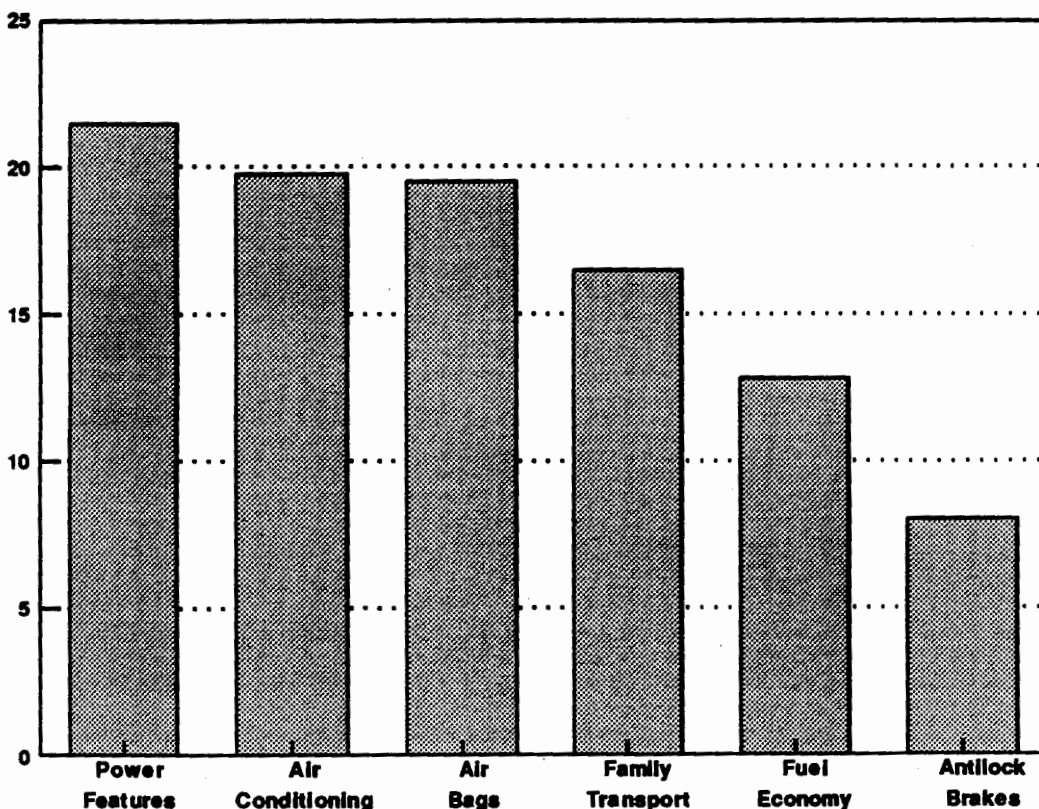
Respondents 21 years of age or older who said they intended to purchase a new car, station wagon, or small passenger van within the next two or three months were interviewed. Four hundred interviews were conducted, only one per household, with the person who would be driving the new car (incidence of qualification was 3.5 percent of the sample). The time taken to complete each interview averaged approximately nine minutes. The margin of sampling error for a sample of 400 respondents is approximately  $\pm 5$  percentage points (i.e., this assures a 95 percent confidence interval for a 50 percent response rate).

## RESULTS

Over half of the respondents (251) had visited dealer showrooms, and the remainder of the sample (149) had not. The sample was fairly evenly divided between males (53 percent) and females (47 percent), and the average age of the respondents was 41.4 years. About a quarter of those interviewed had children under the age of 6 years in their household. The majority of the sample had at least some college education (69 percent), were employed full-time (70 percent), and earned in excess of \$25,000 per annum (75 percent).

Most of those interviewed intended to buy a car (70 percent); 21 percent of the respondents were looking for a small passenger van and 6 percent for a station wagon. The remainder of the sample was undecided. Although the majority of those surveyed were looking for a car that was the same size as the last car they bought (50 percent), over a third of the respondents were looking for a larger car.

**Figure 1**  
**What Features are You Looking for in a New Car/Van/Station Wagon?**  
 (Open-ended Question)  
 Percent



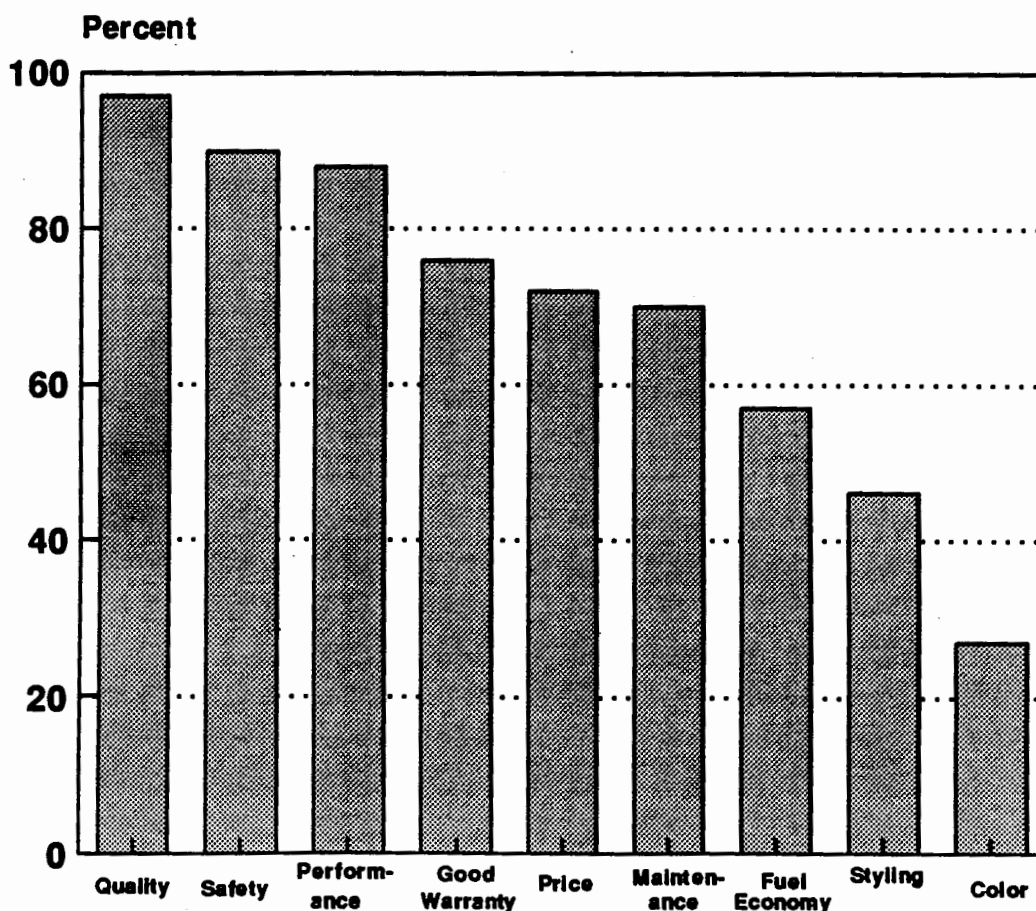
When asked why they were looking for a car that is larger than their last car, most respondents specified convenience factors (e.g., 36 percent specified family transportation), and about 7 percent specified safety. Only about 11 percent of the respondents were looking for a smaller car, and this was for predominantly financial reasons (e.g., purchase price, fuel economy).

The indications from the survey are that safety is a very important consideration when buying a new car. When asked to describe what features they were looking for in their new vehicle, 20 percent of the respondents spontaneously mentioned air bags (Figure 1). Convenience features were also a primary consideration. Power features, such as power windows and locks, and air conditioning were mentioned by 22 percent of those interviewed. Antilock brakes were mentioned by only 8 percent of the respondents.

Respondents were asked to rate a series of nine features according to how important each feature was when buying a new vehicle (Figure 2). Almost 90 percent of those polled indicated that safety was a very important consideration for them when buying a new vehicle, and only quality was rated more highly (97 percent). Cost considerations such as price, maintenance costs, and fuel economy were not rated as highly. More drivers age 60 years and above (35 percent) than young drivers (23 percent) rated large size as a very important consideration when buying a new car.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents claimed that safety is more important now than when they bought their last car, compared with 36 percent who indicated that performance and handling are more important now and 16 percent who said that styling is now a more important consideration.

**Figure 2**  
**Features That are Rated Very Important when Buying a New Car**

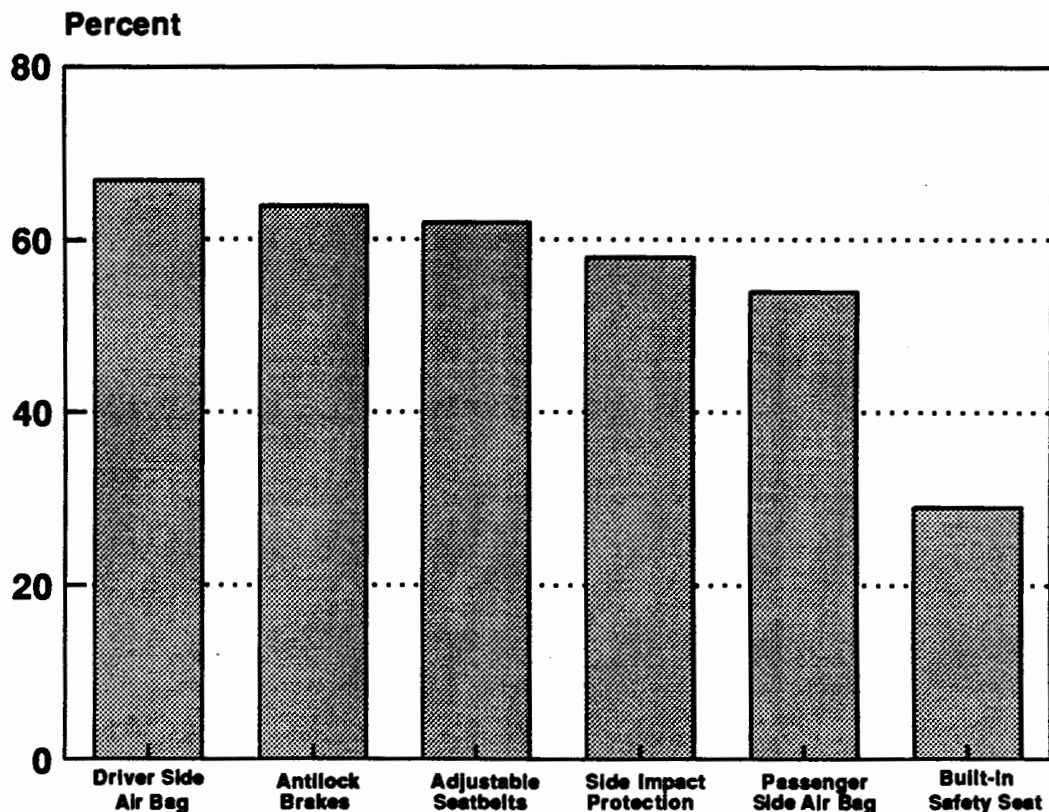


When consumers were asked to rate the importance of specific safety features when buying a new car (Figure 3), driver side air bags were rated as very important by 67 percent of those interviewed and passenger side air bags were rated very important by 54 percent. Antilock brakes, although not volunteered very frequently by consumers as features that they were looking for in a new car, were nevertheless rated as very important by 64 percent of the respondents. Adjustable seat belts and advanced side impact protection were also rated as very important by about 60 percent of those polled. Built-in child safety seats were considered a very important feature by 45 percent of those interviewed who had children in their household under the age of six. As has been found in other surveys, women rated safety features more highly than men (Figure 4).

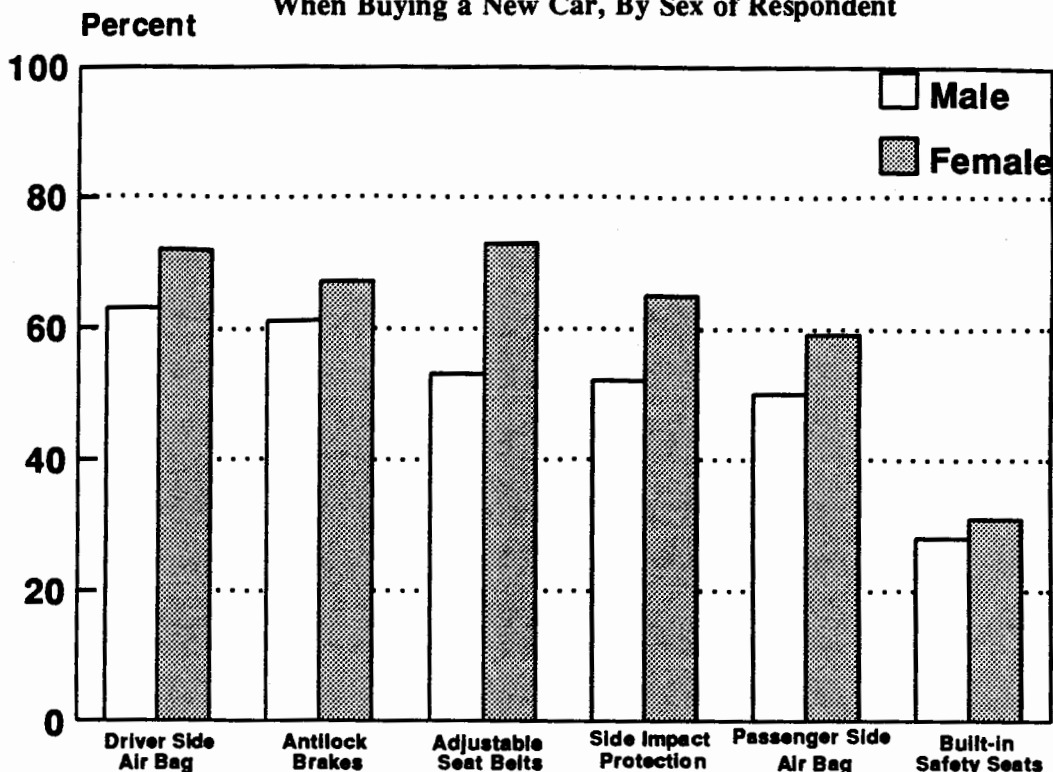
Sixty-seven percent of the new car buyers interviewed indicated that they planned to consider the ability of car bumpers to prevent damage in low speed collisions when choosing a new car, and 83 percent said that they would choose protective bumpers over stylish bumpers. Women were more likely than men to prefer protective bumpers (90 percent vs. 77 percent), and men were more likely than women to choose stylish bumpers (20 percent vs. 9 percent).

Prospective new car buyers were asked whether they planned to consider government and other safety crash ratings when buying a new car. The majority of respondents (57 percent) indicated that they did, and this proportion increased with the level of education of the respondent. Less than half (44 percent) of the respondents who were educated at the high

**Figure 3**  
Safety Features That are Rated Very Important When Buying a New Car



**Figure 4**  
**Safety Features That are Rated Very Important**  
**When Buying a New Car, By Sex of Respondent**



school level or below planned to consider safety ratings, compared with 66 percent of those who were college graduates or had a postgraduate education.

When asked whether they felt more at risk on today's roads than five years ago, the majority (50 percent) of drivers said that they did. Only 12 percent thought they were now at less risk. This trend was particularly notable for older drivers. Sixty-three percent of older drivers (age 60 and above) considered themselves to be more at risk now than five years ago, compared with only 44 percent of young drivers (age 21-29 years).

Researchers have found that, when drivers are asked to evaluate their own driving skills, they consider their driving abilities to be well above average (Delhomme, 1991). In this survey, respondents were asked to rate their driving skills compared to the average driver in the United States. Consistent with previous research,

32 percent of those polled rated their driving skills far above average, and 41 percent considered themselves to be somewhat above average drivers. Only 2 percent of those polled considered their driving skills to be below average. The implication of such findings is that drivers who consider themselves to be superior in driving abilities may feel that safety campaigns are directed at other drivers and not themselves. This could explain why safety campaigns typically have had such disappointing results.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this survey indicate that safety is a high priority for consumers. Not only is safety much more important now than it was when consumers purchased their last car but it is second only to quality among those features

considered very important when buying a new car.

The survey also confirmed that air bags are the most highly sought after of all the current safety options, and this was evident both when consumers are asked to volunteer the features that they are looking for in a new car and when prompted with a list of safety features. However, other features such as antilock brakes, adjustable seat belts, and advanced side impact protection were also rated as very important by the majority of those polled.

These results validate the recent emphasis on safety in car advertising and suggest that car manufacturers may want to continue to provide a broad range of safety features in new cars. In addition, the results of this survey verify the need to keep the consumer informed about the various safety options available on new cars, and to provide reliable, accessible crash test ratings of new cars so that they can make informed decisions.

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