Public Opinion Surveys on Occupant Crash Protection

Adrian K. Lund and Allan F. Williams

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In the United States during the last decade, more than 20 public opinion polls have included questions on occupant crash protection. Findings from these polls include the following:

- **All-Industry Research Advisory Council, 1981**: In a national survey of adults aged 18 years and older, 65 percent rated as "very important" the degree to which a car protects people from injury, trailing only price, mileage, and operating cost as the prime concerns in choosing a new car. Twenty-five percent rated type of restraint as very important. Fifty-one percent thought about the right safety features were already provided on new cars, and 39 percent believed more were needed (1).

- **Tarrance and Associates, 1981**: In a national telephone survey of U.S. adults, most respondents reported not wearing seat belts. Most thought belts should be worn, and 58 percent said they were not un receptive to increasing their use of belts. When asked why people do not wear belts, the three reasons volunteered most frequently were inconvenience, forgetfulness, and discomfort. Entrapment and danger of belt use were mentioned as reasons for nonuse of belts by only seven percent and one percent, respectively. However, when entrapment was specifically suggested to respondents as a reason people give for not wearing belts, 42 percent agreed that it was a "very important reason." Thus, although few respondents seemed to fear being entrapped themselves, many apparently believed that people who do have such a fear would not use seat belts (2).

- **National Analysts, 1981**: Personal interviews with a national sample of new-car owners or prospective car buyers found that 90 percent were "somewhat" (39 percent) or "very" (51 percent) interested in the crashworthiness ratings of new cars. When respondents were asked to choose one from a set of 32 hypothetical new cars, described in terms of 10 characteristics, car make was the characteristic that influenced choice the most, followed by price and gas mileage. Crashworthiness, damageability, maintainability, and car size characteristics ranked next and were about one third as influential as make. Finally, styling, ride, and acceleration characteristics had the least influence (only about one sixth that of make).
Seventy-eight percent liked "the idea of government ratings of things, like safety and maintenance costs," with 35 percent willing to add an extra $20 to a car's price tag to pay for tests. The most frequently preferred location of ratings results was the new car window sticker (25 percent of respondents) (3).

- Opinion Research Corporation, 1981: In a national telephone survey, only 12 percent of Chevette owners and 23 percent of Rabbit owners reported they bought automatic belts because they liked them, with 37 percent and 25 percent, respectively, unaware that they had ordered cars with automatic belts. However, acceptance of the belts was high, with 74 percent of VW owners and 44 percent of Chevette owners saying they would prefer automatic belts over the manual type. Reported belt use on last drive was 99 percent for Rabbit automatics, 70 percent for Chevette automatics, 48 percent for Rabbit manuals, and 31 percent for Chevette manuals (4).

- The Priam Corporation, 1980: Twenty-three "focus groups" discussed attitudes and opinions about safety and the Minicars Research Safety Vehicle (RSV). Considerations such as price and fuel economy dominated car buying discussions, but safety became a concern when new protective features were presented. Given information on the RSV program and data on auto crashes and injuries, most panelists said they would be willing to pay between $300 and $1,500 for a "safety package" of features on a new car. Twenty-six percent were interested in buying the RSV if it were on the market in the next 30 days (5).

- New York Times, 1980: In a national survey, consumers were asked, "Would you favor or oppose requiring car manufacturers to equip all new cars with air safety bags?" Nearly half (45 percent) said they were in favor, while 32 percent were opposed. Drivers under 35 years old voted 63 percent in favor to 21 percent opposed. In contrast, 93 percent of the retail automobile dealers sampled opposed air bag requirements. Only 19 percent of consumers and 16 percent of dealers favored a $25 fine for not wearing seat belts; 73 percent and 81 percent, respectively, opposed such a fine (6).

- Area Market Research Associates, 1979: A telephone survey of Arkansas motorists aged 16 and older indicated that a very large majority were aware of air bags and how they work. Nearly three fourths favored requiring air bags in new cars; women were more likely than men to favor mandatory air bags (52 vs. 64 percent). Another three fourths said they seldom
or never used safety belts, the most frequently reported reasons for nonuse being forgetfulness/laziness, discomfort, "too much bother," and inconvenience. About 94 percent favored belt-use laws and 86 percent favored a helmet-use law. Women were more favorable than men to seat belt laws (59 vs. 48 percent). Data were not provided on support for helmet laws in relation to respondent sex.

Almost all respondents with children aged 1-5 years reported ownership of child restraint systems, but only 35 percent said they used them "always." About 63 percent favored retention of the 55 mph speed limit, with 29 percent giving safety as a reason; another 13 percent gave safety and gas as reasons (7).

- House Government Activities and Transportation Subcommittee, 1979 (reporting results of General Motors' 1979, 1978 and 1971 surveys). Subcommittee's summary of the 1979 survey indicated that among "200 owners of large size GM cars," 70 percent preferred air bags to three different systems of automatic belts, "even though the air bag was priced over $350 and the next most expensive automatic belt system was less than half that amount." Passive restraints were preferred four to one over a mandatory seat belt law, and 85 percent said they would buy a full-size car with passive restraints.

Subcommittee's summary of the 1978 GM survey indicated that "over a thousand" GM car owners or intended buyers were "afforded the opportunity ... to experience the various systems [active belts, passive belts, air bags] as they would in their own cars .... Passive restraint systems ... were preferred by a margin of two to one over a mandatory seat belt law .... About 56 percent of the total sample preferred the air cushion even though it was said to cost over $300, while the next preferred automatic belt would cost less than half that amount and another automatic seat belt would cost less than one-quarter the price of the air bag."

Subcommittee's summary of GM's 1971 survey of 630 people not employed by the auto industry who participated in a Chicago workshop stated that, after exposure to various films, hypothetical news stories, and prices, 75 percent preferred passive restraints to active ones, with 50 percent preferring air bags. Only five percent wanted no restraints and 20 percent wanted current, active belts. When asked to choose between passive belts and air bags, 56 percent chose air bags, and 41
percent said they would buy a different make of car to get them (8).

- Teknekron, Inc., 1979: A national telephone survey of drivers found that only 24 percent reported using belts always or almost always (50 percent reported never using them), although 42 percent thought the belt was very likely to protect them. Only eight percent said the belt was very likely to cause an injury. Mandatory belt use laws were favored by 52 percent, and automatic belts were seen as a "great idea" by 36 percent while 32 percent said they would disconnect them. Respondents favored air bags over automatic belts, 51 percent to 40 percent even when air bags were said to cost $100-$200 more than the belts. The 55 mph speed limit was favored by 77 percent (9).

- Virginia Highway and Transportation Research Council, 1979 (reporting results of a 1978 poll): In a statewide telephone survey of Virginia residents over the age of 16, 90 percent felt driver education should be required for licensees of drivers under 18 years old, 74 percent favored the 55 mph speed limit, 32 percent believed speed limiting devices should be required on cars, 86 percent approved the semi-annual safety inspection, 76 percent of cyclists and 94 percent of non-cyclists supported the state's helmet law, 33 percent favored mandatory seat belt use, 55 percent favored passive restraint requirements, and 56 percent said they would install air bags or automatic belts in their next car at a cost of $200. Forty-two percent felt there was no improvement needed in the state's highways (10).

- ABC News—Louis Harris Survey, 1979: In a national, face-to-face survey of adults, 51 percent said the federal government was moving too slowly in efforts to make automobiles more safe, while only nine percent felt the pace was too fast (11).

- Teknekron, Inc., 1978: A national telephone survey of drivers found that 54 percent favored mandatory belt use legislation. However, less than 25 percent reported always or almost always using belts, and 73 percent supported the passive restraint requirement. (Support was greater among younger drivers.) The 55 mph speed limit was favored by 76 percent (12).

- P.D. Hart and Associates, 1978: Personal, home interviews with a national sample of adults indicated more concern about
injury from automobile crashes than other "accidents." Forty-seven percent felt cars were designed with crash protection in mind, while 38 percent felt the opposite; 65 percent agreed that cars should have as many safety features as possible as standard equipment, while only 26 percent agreed that safety features should be optional. "Safety and safety features" were perceived as of major importance in car buying decisions by 72 percent (76 percent of the women and 68 percent of the men surveyed). These features ranked in importance below cost, gas mileage and repair record, but above insurance rates, comfort, styling, size, dealer service, and make.

Twenty-one percent believed "the chances of getting into an accident are so small that seat belts aren't really worth the inconvenience." Thirty-seven percent said "there's nothing that would make me use seat belts most of the time." Only 16 percent claimed to use belts "almost all the time." Only 25 percent thought the government should encourage belt use, while 46 percent thought the government should require automatic crash protection. Eight percent thought government should do both, 10 percent neither. Fifty-eight percent moderately or strongly favored passive restraint rules, while only 23 percent moderately or strongly opposed them. If air bags cost $350 more than automatic belts, 35 percent would prefer air bag-equipped cars to cars with belts. If bags cost $200 more than belts, 38 percent would prefer air bag-equipped cars. If $100 more, 44 percent would prefer the air bags (13).

• Volvo of America, 1978: Initial attitudes toward passive restraints in focus groups of American men and women ranged from pro-air bag to pro-automatic belt to anti-any passive restraint device, with all attitudes based on relatively little "real knowledge." After these groups saw two films describing both air bags and automatic belts, air bags became a "highly desirable commodity to at least half the participants in each group .... There were even those who had been extremely opposed to air bags who, after seeing the two films, felt that "air bags look like a real good thing to have in your car .... I think they would really matter in a bad accident" [emphasis in original]. Additionally, air bags were overwhelmingly favored over automatic belts, even though groups were told that air bags would cost "at least several hundred dollars, as compared to under $100 ....". This preference seemed to be based on safety, mechanical reliability, and aesthetics (14).
● University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center, 1978: A survey of owners of GM air bag-equipped cars indicated positive, unsolicited comments about air bags. Several respondents said they would want to buy air bags in their next car. In other comments, respondents reported that some mechanics were hesitant to work on the cars and that some dealerships had attempted to discourage the purchase of air bag-equipped cars — e.g., "I might add that I was discouraged by 3 different Buick dealers from purchasing the air bag" [emphasis in original] (15).

● Market Opinion Research, 1978: In a random telephone survey of Michigan drivers aged 16 and older, 80 percent favored mandatory helmet use for motorcyclists (16 percent were opposed). There was less support for mandatory restraint use in automobiles, with 54 percent favoring a restraint law for children under four years old (36 percent opposed), 35 percent supporting a restraint use law for children and teenagers under 18 (54 percent opposed), and 39 percent supporting a universal mandatory restraint use law (56 percent opposed).

When the some questions were asked of a random sample of motorcyclists with listed telephone numbers, 53 percent of the cyclists favored mandatory helmet use (45 percent opposed), 37 percent favored mandatory restraint use for children under four years old (54 percent opposed), 14 percent favored mandatory restraints for children and teenagers (82 percent opposed), and 16 percent favored universal mandatory restraint use (80 percent opposed) (16).

● Virginia Highway and Transportation Council, 1978 (reporting results of a 1977 poll): In a statewide telephone survey of Virginia residents over 16 years old, 30 percent favored right-turn-on-red, 79 percent approved of the 55 mph speed limit (although 68 percent favored raising the limit to 60 mph on interstates), 90 percent favored driver education for drivers under 18 years old, 38 percent favored mandatory belt use, 50 percent approved of mandatory passive restraints, 62 percent would buy air bags as an option at $200 or less, and 85 percent approved of semi-annual auto inspections. Ninety-two percent of non-cyclists (81 percent of cyclists) approved of helmet use laws (17).

● L.S. Robertson, 1977: In a national telephone survey of prospective new-car buyers, respondents indicated a preference
for more automatic crash protection (39 percent) rather than for protection that must be activated by those to be protected (15 percent); 38 percent chose "both types of protection." Respondents were willing to add an average of $12 to their monthly car payments, if the added cost would save 6,000 lives a year; that amount increased to about $17 and $20 to save 12,000 and 18,000 lives, respectively (18).

- Gallup Poll, 1977: By a vote of 46 to 37 percent, a public sample interviewed by Gallup endorsed the installation of air bags in all new cars. Young adults from 18 to 29 years old were strongest in their endorsement, voting 65 to 27 percent in favor. Women of all ages endorsed installation by the substantial margin of 51 to 27 percent, while men were against it by a 47 to 42 percent margin. Seventy-six percent were opposed to a $23 fine for non-use of belts (19).

- Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association, 1976: In personal interviews with a national sample of drivers, 50 percent agreed that "driving should be made more safe than it is today by building more safety devices into cars which cannot be ignored, turned off or removed." However, after being exposed to the concepts of mandatory belt use laws, mandatory air bags, and insurance coverage dependent on belt use, only 26 percent of the respondents said they wanted to see additional laws or regulations requiring more or different safety equipment on cars. Fifty-seven percent said they wanted "to see things stay as they are."

Of the 62 percent who said they knew what an air bag was, only 29 percent said they probably or certainly would vote in favor of requirements mandating these restraints (62 percent against) and 61 percent were unable to put a price on what they were willing to pay for air bags. Of the 39 percent who did give a price, 35 percent said they were willing to pay more than $100.

Twenty-nine percent of all respondents said they would probably or certainly vote in favor of mandatory seat belt use (66 percent opposed), while 16 percent of all respondents said they would probably or certainly favor insurance companies stipulating "no accident coverage if not wearing seat belts" (78 percent opposed) (20).

- Opinion Research Corporation, 1976: Telephone interviews and mail surveys of owners of 1975 model year VWs were conducted to
determine attitudes toward active and passive belt systems, both of which had starter interlocks. Owners of the passive belt systems had higher reported use rates than owners of active systems (79 percent vs. 50 percent), and more favorable attitudes toward the system. Seventy-three percent of passive belt owners rated their seat belts "comfortable to wear," compared with 45 percent of active system owners. Eighteen percent of passive belt owners and 82 percent of active system owners reported their interlocks to be disconnected. Owners of active systems said that two-thirds of the interlock disconnections occurred before they bought or first took delivery of the car (21).

Market Research Group, Inc. for General Motors Corporation, 1975: A national random telephone survey of owners of 1975 model year Oldsmobile Toronado, 98, and 48 cars found that three percent had purchased air bags. Of the purchasers, over half reported that they had bought the bags at their option or that they would have ordered them had they not been on the car.

Of the respondents without air bag-equipped cars, eight percent said they had considered buying the air bags but only 16 percent of them had been "very serious" about it. The major reasons given for not having bought air bags were "not made known of availability" (23 percent), "extra expense" (13 percent), and "never thought about it" (13 percent). At the time of purchase, 32 percent indicated they were not at all aware that air bags were available, and 24 percent said they were only a little aware.

Sixty-eight percent of the respondents thought the public would be interested in air bags at a cost of $100, and 38 percent thought there would still be interest at $200. At $300, only 19 percent felt the public would be interested (22).


