

INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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DESPITE WARNINGS, MANY CHILDREN STILL RIDE UNRESTRAINED OR IN THE FRONT SEAT

ARLINGTON, VA – Parents and other drivers on U.S. roads still have a long way to go when it comes to protecting children in motor vehicles. Despite extensive publicity aimed at getting children restrained and riding in the rear seats of vehicles, observational surveys in three states show many children still riding unrestrained. Other children are improperly restrained or riding in the front seats of cars equipped with passenger airbags.

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety researchers observed motor vehicle seating positions and restraint use among children ages 12 and younger in Michigan, North Carolina, and Texas during the spring and summer of 1998. Overall 64 to 75 percent of all children were using either a child restraint or safety belt, but many of the belted children were improperly restrained. That is, they were using the shoulder portion of the belt system behind the back or under the arm.

Researchers found that restraint use varies according to children's ages and whether they're sitting in front or rear seats. "Of particular concern are the 3 to 6 year-olds," says Institute research vice president Susan Ferguson. "About half of all children in this age group in North Carolina were observed riding unrestrained or improperly restrained in the front seat – this in a state where adult belt use is close to 85 percent. Because so many children this age travel unrestrained or improperly restrained in front seats, it probably shouldn't come as a surprise that a high proportion of the deaths from deploying airbags among children 1-11 years – 33 of the 57 deaths in this age group in the United States – were 3 to 6 year olds."

Overall, fewer children were observed riding in the front seats of cars with passenger airbags, compared with cars that don't have such airbags. In all three states,

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about 16–20 percent of 3 to 6 year olds were sitting in the front seats of vehicles with passenger airbags. The percentage was higher – about a third – among 7–12 year olds and fewer than 10 percent among children 2 and younger. This problem of riding up front may become more dangerous as today’s cars with passenger airbags reach the resale market. “Then if parents who got used to letting kids ride up front in cars without passenger airbags continue to do this, many more children will be at risk of injury from deploying airbags,” Ferguson points out.

Children aren’t riding in front seats because it’s the only place for them to sit. The rear seats were unoccupied more than two-thirds of the time when children were observed sitting in front, and about 20 percent of the time there was only one person sitting in the rear.

All states have mandatory child restraint laws. However, children 4 and older often are covered by adult safety belt laws, most of which apply to front-seat occupants only and provide for secondary enforcement. This means officers cannot stop motorists for belt violations alone.

End 2-page release on children’s seating positions & restraint use.

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