

PUBLIC SUPPORTS TRAFFIC SAFETY LAWS AND THEIR ACTIVE ENFORCEMENT

Legislation and its active enforcement are proven components of successful traffic safety programs. Yet forceful action in these areas is sometimes resisted because of concerns about imposing requirements on the public. According to the results of a recent national telephone survey, the public strongly supports a broad array of traffic safety laws.

More than 8,000 people in all 50 states and the District of Columbia participated in a national telephone survey conducted for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). There were two questionnaires, each given to about 4,000 randomly selected persons age 16 and older. One questionnaire focused on safety belt usage and issues. The other focused on child safety seats. They also contained sections on crash experience, bicycle and motorcycle helmet usage, airbags, drinking and driving, and speed. Data were weighted to national estimates.

84 Percent Favor Safety Belt Laws

More than four fifths (84 percent) of the public favor laws that require both drivers and front seat passengers to wear safety belts, with 64 percent favoring such laws *a lot*. Most believe that the laws should apply to passengers riding in the back seat as well. They consider fines generally to be an appropriate method of punishment for ignoring the safety belt laws, and the fines should become more severe for repeat offenders. They recommended an average fine of \$50 for a first offense and \$118 for repeat violations. There was less support for attaching points to the drivers license as a penalty.

Strong State Laws are Better Known

People who live in states that have a strong belt law are much more likely to know correctly what the law entails. For example, 76 percent of those living in states that require the driver and all passengers to wear a belt accurately report this to be the case. In contrast, in states where belt use is mandated only for those in the front seat, just 52 percent are correct. Similarly, people who live in states with primary enforcement, where an officer can stop a vehicle solely for a safety belt violation, were more likely to be correct (76 percent). About half of those who live in states with secondary enforcement, where an officer must first stop the vehicle for some other reason, were correct (48 percent).

Strong Support for Protecting Children

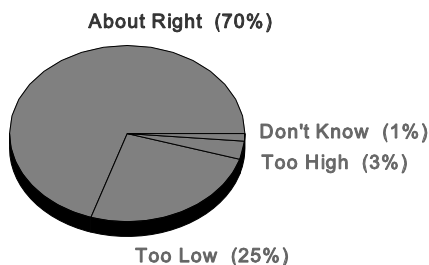
Laws that protect children have strong support from the public. About three quarters favor strict enforcement of car seat laws. They recommend fines for car seat violations that are substantially higher than safety belt violations, averaging \$126. When children become too large for a car seat, the public overwhelmingly agrees that they should be required to wear safety belts.

Bicycle Helmet Laws Favored

Laws requiring children to wear bicycle helmets are relatively recent, but already enjoy widespread support. Most (79 percent) of the public favor these laws. Another 3 percent support bicycle helmet laws in specific circumstances or for specific ages of children covered by the law.

70 Percent Think the 55 mph Speed Limit is Just Right

Most people readily admit that they speed at least a little on highways with a posted limit of 55 mph. But this does not mean they want the speed limit raised. At the time the survey was conducted, just before states assumed responsibility for establishing speed limits on all roadways, 70 percent of the public considered most highway speed limits to be *about right*. Three percent considered them too high, and 25 percent thought that the speed limits were too low.



In general, do you think most highway speed limits are too low, too high, or about right?

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Strong Support for Motorcycle Helmet Laws

Laws requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets evoke a level of support akin to that for children's bike helmet laws -- 82 percent of the general public favor them. Even among motorcyclists, the majority (62 percent) favor mandatory usage of helmets.

HOW TO ORDER

Limited copies of the *Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey*, prepared by Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. are available. Write to the Office of Program Development and Evaluation, NHTSA, NTS-30, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590, or send a FAX to (202) 366-7096.

For those of you ordering this report, this is the same report announced in *TRAFFIC TECH* No. 117, March 1996, *National Survey of Occupant Protection Reveals Lapses in Belt Use*. Alan Block was the contract manager for this project.