



The Facts To Buckle Up America



Light-Truck Occupants in Rural Communities — Special Challenges

- Fatal crashes in 2003 involved almost twice as many pickup trucks in rural areas (7,588) compared to urban areas (3,462).¹²
- Safety belt use in pickup trucks is lower in rural areas (62 percent) than in suburban areas (70 percent), but is lowest in urban areas (60 percent). By comparison, safety belt use in other vehicles is higher and more consistent in all three geographic areas: for SUVs and vans: 83, 82, and 85 percent respectively for rural, urban, and suburban areas; and for passenger cars: 76, 81, and 83 percent.¹³
- NHTSA focus group studies of young male pickup truck drivers in rural areas indicated there are numerous obstacles to overcome in convincing these drivers to buckle up. These obstacles include: the false belief that being unbelted in a crash is actually safer than being belted; social norms that discourage belt use; a fatalistic view of life; feeling safer in their trucks versus passenger vehicles; and the belief that wearing a safety belt is a personal choice and should not be mandated by law.¹⁴
- Fatal rollover crashes for all vehicle types are most prevalent in rural areas. See the table below.

Passenger Vehicle Occupants Killed in Rollover Crashes		
Source: Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) 2003		
Type of Vehicle	Percent "Known" Rural	Percent "Known" Urban
Pickup Truck	83%	17%
SUV	74%	26%
Van	75%	25%
Passenger Car	73%	27%
<i>The percent known was calculated by omitting the unknown from the overall totals</i>		

- Of the fatalities that occurred in rollover crashes in rural areas, 77 percent of the pickup truck occupants were unbelted and 68 percent of the SUV occupants were unbelted.¹⁵
- In 2003, there were 85 fatalities as a result of passengers riding in the cargo areas of pickup trucks (down from 91 in 2002). Of these fatalities, 55 (or 65 percent) occurred on rural roadways.¹⁶

Safety Belt Use Saves Lives And Dollars

- Safety belts saved 14,903 lives in America in 2003.¹⁷ Unfortunately, 56 percent of the passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were unrestrained.¹⁸
- Research shows that lap/shoulder belts, when used properly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. For light-truck occupants, the effectiveness increases to 60 and 65 percent, respectively, and to 80 percent in rollover crashes.¹⁹
- Safety belts should always be worn, even when riding in vehicles equipped with air bags. Air bags are designed to work with safety belts, not by themselves. Air bags provide about an 11 percent reduction in fatality risk for the belted driver, and 14 percent for the unbelted driver in potentially fatal crashes.²⁰
- Safety belt use saves society an estimated \$50 billion annually in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury-related costs.²¹
- Conversely, safety belt nonuse results in significant economic costs to society. The needless deaths and injuries from safety belt nonuse result in an estimated \$26 billion in economic costs to society annually.²²

Child Safety Seats/Booster Seats Help Protect Children

- In 2003, 471 children under the age of 5 died in crashes on our Nation's highways in passenger vehicle crashes. About 158 (34%) of these children were totally unrestrained.²³ More than twice as many children ages 0-4 died on rural roadways than on urban roadways, and almost half of those killed in rural areas were unrestrained. More than twice as many child fatalities also



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- occurred for children ages 4 to 7, and two and a half times more child fatalities occurred for children 8 to 15 years old on rural roadways, compared to urban roadways.²⁴
- Research shows that child safety seats reduce fatal injury for infants (less than 1 year old) by 71 percent and toddlers (1-4 years old) by 54 percent in passenger cars. For infants and toddlers in light trucks, the corresponding reductions are 58 and 59 percent, respectively.²⁵
- Adult safety belt use is an important predictor of restraint use among children. Observations conducted in 2002 showed that young children were restrained 92 percent of the time when the driver was belted and only 72 percent of the time when the driver was not buckled up.²⁶
- Children 12 and younger should be appropriately restrained in the back seat whenever possible, especially in vehicles equipped with passenger air bags. Because of their small stature, children are at high risk for fatal head and spinal cord injury from a deploying air bag in a crash. Owners of pickup trucks and cars with no rear seat or small rear seats that will not properly accommodate child safety seats should have an on/off switch installed for the passenger air bag. The switch should always be turned to the "OFF" position when a child 12 or younger is transported in the front seat. If the vehicle has a passenger air bag but is not equipped with an air bag on-off switch, owners should contact NHTSA at 888-327-4236 and ask for the brochure *Air Bags and On/Off Switches* and an application for getting a switch installed.²⁷
- Children (and adults) should not be permitted to ride in the cargo areas of pickup trucks under any circumstances.

Stronger Safety Belt Laws Can Make a Difference

- Safety belt use laws vary from State to State. A primary safety belt law allows a law enforcement officer to issue a citation solely when the officer simply observes an unbelted driver or passenger. A secondary law means that a citation for not wearing a safety belt can only be written after the officer stops the vehicle or cites the offender for another infraction. Other major variances in the laws include: amount of fines, seating positions covered, and vehicle exemptions. At the time of this publication 22 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico had primary laws, 27 States had secondary laws, and New Hampshire had no adult law.
- Primary safety belt laws are much more effective in increasing safety belt use, because people are more likely to buckle up when there is the perceived risk of receiving a citation for not doing so. In 2004, the average safety belt use rate in States with primary enforcement laws was 11 percentage points higher than in States without primary enforcement laws – 84 versus 73 respectively.²⁸ Among pickup trucks the rate was 71 percent versus 55 percent respectively (based on 2003 data).²⁹
- Laws making it illegal for children (up to 18 years old) to ride in the cargo area of pickup trucks vary from State to State as well. Some States have laws without exemptions; other States include exemptions such as when all seats are occupied, age specifications, vehicle speed, road type, special events or circumstances, etc.

Law Enforcement Can Make a Difference

- Occupant Protection Selective Traffic Enforcement Programs (STEPS) are periods of highly visible safety belt enforcement campaigns combined with extensive media support. These programs are a proven method to change motorists' safety belt use behavior quickly. Successful Occupant Protection STEPs have been documented in Canada, Europe, and the United States.^{30 31 32 33}
- While STEPs are a successful method to increase safety belt use, rural America faces challenges in implementing this approach, especially rural States with secondary safety belt laws. Limited resources, inadequate manpower, and lack of community support for strong enforcement leads to decreased participation by rural communities in coordinated national, State, and local safety belt enforcement campaigns.
- Enforcement alone has its limitations for increasing safety belt use. However, enforcement of safety belt laws, combined with intensive media support, is effective in increasing safety belt use because the perceived risk of receiving a safety belt citation is increased. Research shows that people will buckle up if they believe the police are enforcing the law.





Forming Partnerships to Reach Rural Areas

When implementing safety belt campaigns in rural areas, it is important to tie into existing infrastructures serving rural areas, especially those at the community level. Examples of organizations include 4-H, the National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, Farm Safety 4 Just Kids, the National Rural Health Association, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Indian Health Service, and the Office of Rural Health Policy (Department of Health and Human Services). Local businesses, media, and civic organizations are also valuable sources for additional support.

Message emphasis should be based on community norms and acceptance, and on what the high-risk group (i.e., pickup truck occupants due to their low observed safety belt use) will likely respond to. Examples of such initiatives include:

- Buckle Up Santa Rosa by Think First of Northwest Florida and Pick Up the Buckle, by Avera Rural Health Institute in Sioux Falls, South Dakota – both NHTSA rural pickup truck safety belt demonstration projects;
- Kids Aren't Cargo – a NHTSA national campaign initiated by a concerned mother after several crashes involving children in the back of pickups occurred in her community; and
- Buckle Up or Eat Glass – an education program developed by Farm Safety 4 Just Kids that targets rural teen pickup truck drivers.

References

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Safety Belts and Rural Communities - 2005 Report

Rural Americans face a greater risk of being injured or killed in a traffic crash than people who live and commute in urban areas. The fact is, only 21 percent of the population lives in rural areas in this country, yet 39.5 percent of the total vehicle miles traveled are on rural roads. In 2003, rural traffic crashes accounted for 60 percent of the total fatalities on our Nation's highways.¹ Many factors contribute to this, including some that are unique to rural areas. For instance, rural crashes often occur in isolated areas, causing a delay in the time of discovery and in the delivery of emergency services to the victim. Other prominent factors contributing to the high rural crash and fatality rates include alcohol involvement, high-speed crashes, low safety belt use, vehicle rollovers, and ejections.

Although safety belt use in rural areas increased to 76 percent in 2004,* it remains slightly lower than the national rate (80 percent).² The lower rate may be attributable to the lower use of safety belts among pickup truck occupants in rural areas (62 percent in 2003), a common mode of transportation.³

Along with pickup truck occupants, another high-risk group is 15- to 20-year-olds. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds. In 2003, 7,884 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes, 3,657 were killed, and an additional 308,000 were injured.⁴ *Almost twice as many vehicle occupants in this age group died in rural area crashes compared to urban crashes.* Sixty percent of these young people who died in rural area crashes were unrestrained, compared to 52 percent in urban areas and 51 percent of the total for all age groups.⁵ To achieve further gains in rural safety belt use, campaigns will need to focus more directly on rural communities and among these high-risk groups within those communities.

Rural Communities Are at Risk

- In 2003, 25,383 people died in motor vehicle crashes in rural areas.⁶
- The motor vehicle fatality rate in rural areas is more than double the fatality rate in urban areas. In 2003, the fatality rate in rural areas was 2.3 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT) vs. 1.0 fatality per 100 million VMT in urban areas.⁷
- In 2003, more fatally injured occupants were ejected from vehicles in fatal rural crashes compared to fatal urban crashes.⁸ See the table below.

Percent Fatal Passenger Vehicle Occupant Ejections in 2003		
Source: Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) 2003		
(Rural vs. Urban Fatal Crashes)		
Type of Vehicle	Rural Crashes	Urban Crashes
All Passenger Vehicles	30%	21%
Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs)	48%	40%
Pickup Trucks	38%	29%

- Of those rural fatalities involving ejections, 87 percent of the SUV occupants were unbelted and 92 percent of the pickup truck occupants were unbelted.⁹
- Over 70 percent of the fatal crashes on roadways with posted speeds of 55 mph or higher occurred in rural areas.¹⁰
- In fatal single-vehicle crashes in 2003, over half (59 percent or 7,650) of the vehicles ran off the road in rural areas, versus 38 percent (or 3,287) in urban areas.¹¹

*Note: The majority of data for this fact sheet is from 2003, which is the latest year available at the time of publication. In some instances 2004 data was available and was included.

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