

Seat Belt Use Increases in Maine Following Change to Primary Enforcement

Primary seat belt laws are associated with higher self-reported seat belt use rates and fewer traffic fatalities following enactment. Primary laws allow police to issue a citation solely upon observation of a seat belt violation. In contrast, secondary laws require that police first observe another violation (e.g., speeding) before being able to issue a seat belt citation. States with primary laws have higher observed seat belt usage rates than those with secondary laws. As of July 2008, 26 States had primary belt laws.

Maine upgraded its seat belt law from secondary to primary, effective September 20, 2007, with an educational grace period to April 1, 2008. Preusser Research Group examined the effect of the law change on public awareness of the new law, seat belt use, and police attitudes. They collected data both before and after enforcement of the law and immediately following Maine's *Click It or Ticket* May 2008 mobilization.

Method

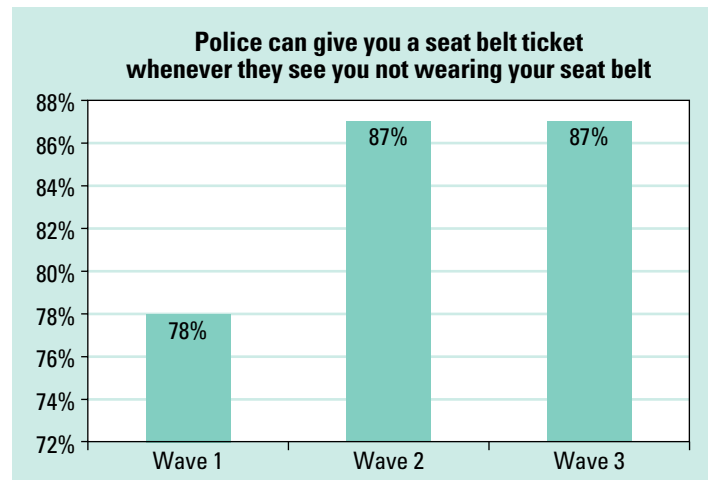
This evaluation consisted of three parts: (1) public awareness surveys, (2) seat belt observations, and (3) police focus groups. Researchers assessed public awareness of the new law and observed seat belt use in three waves. Wave 1 took place in late February 2008, when the primary law upgrade had already gone into effect but police could only issue warnings (unless another violation also occurred). Wave 2 took place in late April/early May when law enforcement was allowed to fully enforce seat belt violations under the primary law rules. Between Wave 1 and Wave 2, Maine conducted a media campaign to raise public awareness of the primary belt law, and many police departments conducted high-visibility enforcement campaigns during this time. Wave 3 took place after May 30, following the nationwide *Click It or Ticket* mobilization.

Results

Public Awareness

Public awareness surveys showed that Maine drivers were aware of the law change and were cognizant of its consequences. As shown in Figure 1 below, the percentage of respondents who believed that *Police can give you a seat belt ticket whenever they see you not wearing your seat belt* increased from Wave 1 (pre-enforcement) to Wave 2 (post-enforcement).

Figure 1. Knowledge of the Seat Belt Law

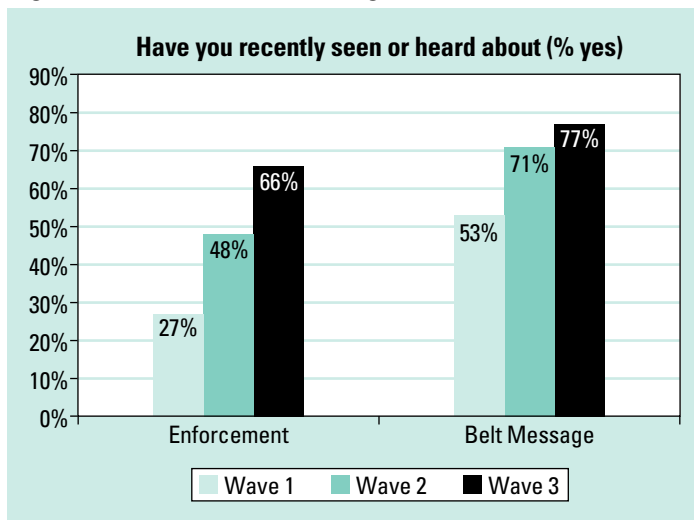


Motorists also felt there was an increase in strictness of enforcement. Survey results showed that motorists' perceptions of enforcement certainty, both at the local and State levels, increased significantly.

The percentage of respondents who reported having seen or heard about increased enforcement or messages encouraging the use of seat belts also increased over time (see Figure 2).

There was also a clearly marked increase in the percentage of respondents recognizing the slogan *Click It or Ticket*, going from 38% in Wave 1 to 46% in Wave 2, reaching a high of 64% after the May mobilization.

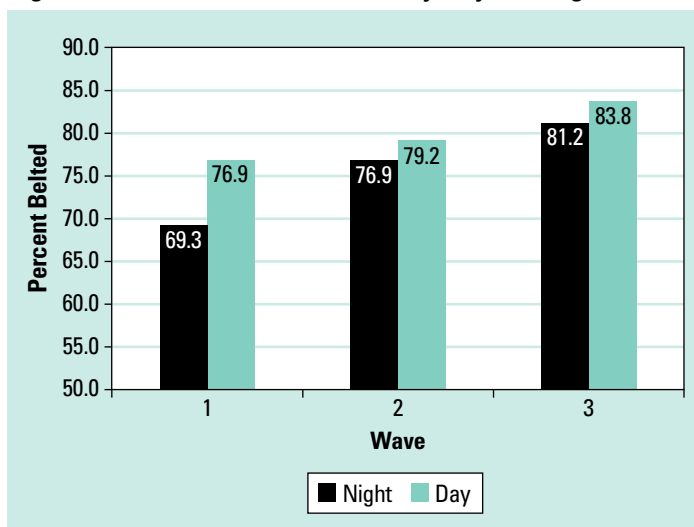
Figure 2. Awareness of Messages



Observed Seat Belt Use

Field observers made approximately 27,000 belt use observations as part of this evaluation: 23,000 during the day and 4,000 at night. Observed seat belt use increased from each wave to the next during both day and night (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Observed Seat Belt Use by Day and Night

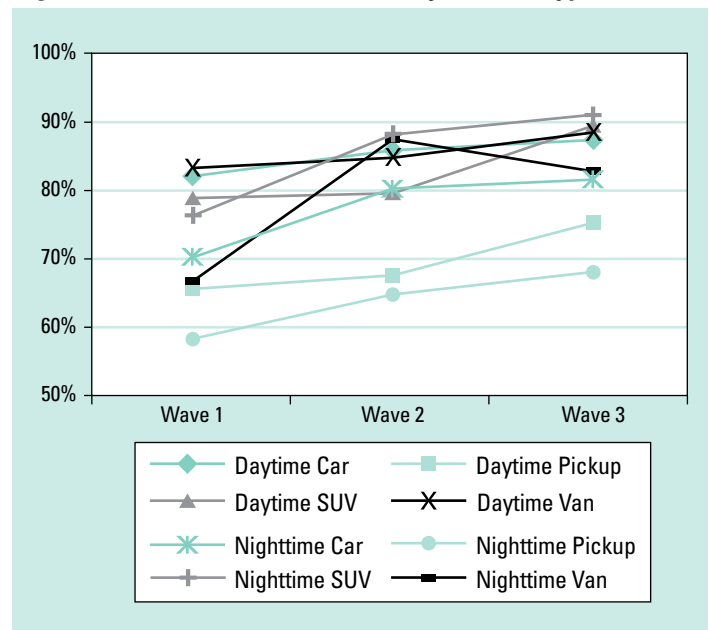


Across the three waves, daytime seat belt use increased from 77% to 84%, and nighttime belt use rose from 69% to 81%. Although daytime belt use was higher than nighttime use in general, the impact of the law change was greater for night belt use than for day belt use. Almost all demographic groups showed increases in belt use across waves (see Figure 4).

Police Focus Groups

Focus groups with law enforcement showed that officers responded positively to the change in law. All agencies believed that the level of seat belt enforcement activity on regular patrols increased during the six-month transition when warnings were permitted on primary seat belt stops and after April 2008 when standard enforcement went into effect. They generally believed that motorists were buckling up more frequently following the law change and have had no negative feedback about primary enforcement.

Figure 4. Observed Seat Belt Use by Vehicle Type



Summary

Maine drivers were aware of the law change and adjusted their behavior accordingly. Belt use increased during daylight hours and increased even more at night when crash risk per mile driven is at its highest. These results should be of particular interest to those States that still have secondary belt use enforcement laws and are considering upgrading to primary laws.

How to Order

To order *Evaluation of Maine's Seat Belt Law Change From Secondary to Primary Enforcement* (25 pages plus appendices), write to the Office of Behavioral Safety Research, NHTSA, NTI-132, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE., Washington, DC 20590, fax 202-366-7394, or download from www.nhtsa.dot.gov.