



## Seat Belt Use Rises in a Missouri County With A Primary Seat Belt Enforcement Ordinance

Statewide observed seat belt use has remained unchanged in Missouri for the past several years. In 2007 Missouri's usage was 77%, five points below the national rate of 82% and 8 points below the average rate of 85% in 15 States that upgraded their seat belt laws since 1996. This plateau in usage occurred in spite of regular and active participation in annual mobilizations. St. Louis County has also participated regularly in high-visibility enforcement (HVE) mobilizations over the past decade, experiencing gains through 2005 but a slight decline since that time.

In March 2007 St. Louis County implemented a seat belt ordinance that allowed for traditional enforcement procedures. In order to increase usage on St. Louis County roads, particularly on roadways with fatal or disabling injury crashes, the St. Louis County Police Department (SLCPD) conducted an intense HVE campaign along an 8-mile corridor on State Highway 21 (in the southeastern part of the county). This corridor was selected in part because there had been at least 8 fatal or disabling injury crashes along this roadway in recent years. A similar roadway, Highway 24, was selected in Jackson County (located across the State) to serve as a comparison site for evaluation purposes.

### Media

The HVE program was implemented on November 17, 2008. A press release was issued three days prior to the start of the enforcement activity and a media event was held on the first day of the campaign. The press release and media event were intended to generate news stories in the local media. Associated with the two-week effort, State and County officials reported 10 news stories, evenly distributed among television, radio, and print media. Nine variable message boards and six permanent signs were used along the 8-mile corridor to make the public aware of the ongoing enforcement activity. The variable message boards contained a variety of messages including: "Buckle Up – Seatbelt Law Enforced," "Click It or Ticket," and "Buckle Up – It's the Law – Ordinance Enforced Ahead." All six permanent signs read "Buckle Up. It's the Law, County Ordinance 1217.095." There was no paid media and no public service media.

### Enforcement

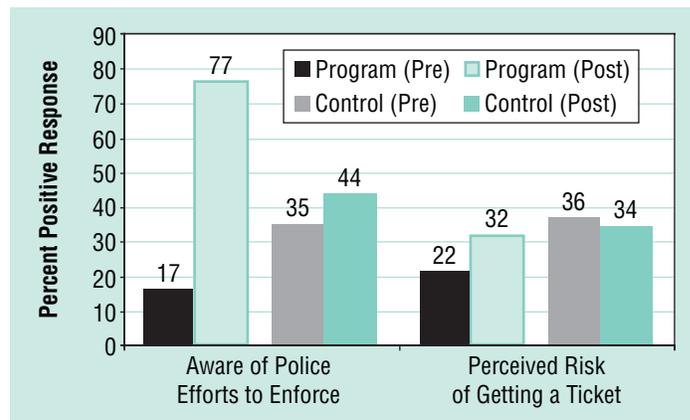
Enforcement consisted of both saturation patrols and enforcement zones with an emphasis on issuing citations rather than

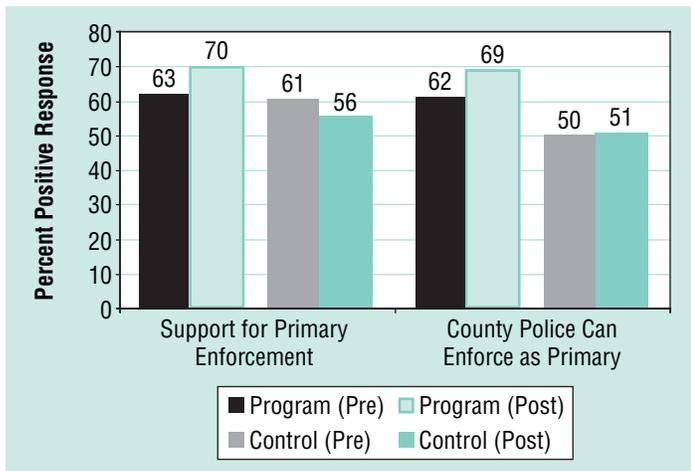
warnings. The 13-day HVE effort included just over 500 total enforcement hours. During these hours, all six officers of the SLCPD Highway Safety Unit plus a small group of additional officers saturated the targeted corridor, actively observing for seat belt violations. As a result, they issued a total of 991 citations and 140 warnings for seat belt violations, plus an additional 12 citations for child passenger safety law violations. Thus, the total number of "actions" or "contacts" for seat belt and child seat violations was just under 1,150, with 88% of such actions resulting in citations issued.

### Awareness

There were large gains in program awareness and changes in perceptions for the targeted corridor, Highway 21 in St. Louis County, whereas few such changes were found for the control corridor, Highway 24 in Jackson County. Awareness of *seat belt enforcement* on Highway 21 increased from 17% (pre-program) to 77% (post-program), an increase of 61 percentage points. Results from the surveys on Highway 24 showed a less dramatic increase of 9 percentage points in awareness of seat belt enforcement. The perceived *risk of getting a ticket* for riding unbuckled (for six months) increased from 22% to 32% in the program area. In contrast, there was a small decline in perceived risk for Jackson County.

The percentage of respondents who *avored a primary law* increased from 63% to 70% in St. Louis County. In comparison, support for a primary law declined in Jackson





County (from 61% to 56%). The percentage of respondents who thought that *county police could enforce the seat belt law as a primary offense* increased from 62% to 69% in St. Louis County.

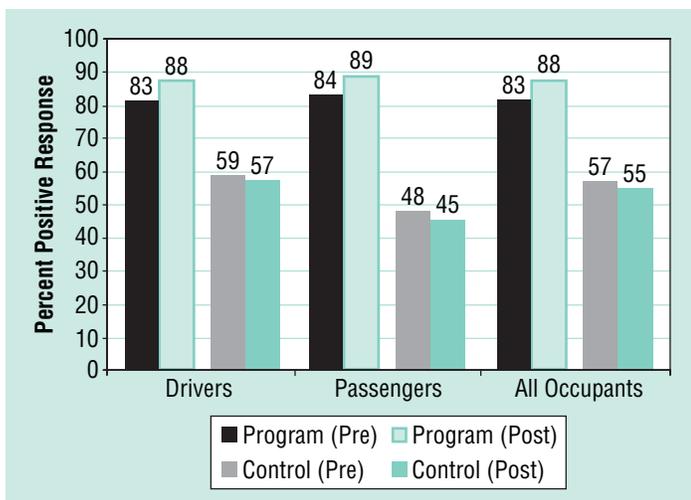
### Changes in Observed Usage

A total of 25,877 front-seat, passenger-vehicle occupants were observed along the Highway 21 and 24 corridors.

Observed seat belt use increased by 4.9 percentage points along the Highway 21 corridor (from 83.3% to 88.2%), whereas observed use declined by 2.2 percentage points along the Highway 24 (control) corridor.

### Officer and Motorist Reactions

Officers in the Highway Safety Unit reported that the enforcement effort had gone very well and that it became much harder to find violators towards the end of the campaign. They indi-



cated that most motorists understood why county police were enforcing the law and supported their efforts. One officer indicated that most of the motorists ticketed did not even know that the county had a primary ordinance.

Every officer in the unit endorsed the county ordinance wholeheartedly and thought that the State should enact a statewide primary law. Two indicated that they were now more aware of the ordinance and were enforcing it more frequently than before, particularly as a primary law. Several indicated that they thought the fine should be increased from \$10 to a minimum of \$25. With regard to *how to increase usage or at least maintain a high rate in the county*, these officers suggested: (a) enacting a statewide primary law; (b) publicizing the law and their efforts; (c) increasing the fine; and (d) conducting additional enforcement campaigns. Some additional observations were that: passengers typically did not know that the law applied to them as well as to drivers; most teens did not know that not wearing a seat belt was a violation of their restricted driver's license; and many motorists were not aware of the county's primary ordinance, at least not prior to this campaign.

### Summary and Implications

This corridor program was characterized by a strong enforcement effort, with approximately two citations issued per officer hour worked. Due to a lack of time and resources, there was no paid media and little or no broadcast media. The results showed a significant increase in all indices of public awareness and perception and a significant increase in observed usage in the targeted corridor. There were significant increases in usage among pickup truck occupants as well as among occupants of other vehicles. This is important in that occupants of pickup trucks have historically had lower observed usage than occupants of other vehicles in Missouri.

If Missouri enacted a statewide primary law upgrade and implemented regular HVE programs, similar to the program implemented in St. Louis County, Missouri could experience an estimated 30 to 70 fewer deaths, 400 to 900 fewer serious injuries, and \$110 million to \$215 million in lower economic costs annually.

### How to Order

To order *Evaluation of a County Enforcement Program With a Primary Seat Belt Ordinance: St. Louis County, Missouri* (34 pages), prepared by Preusser Research Group, 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.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov) or <http://ntl.bts.gov/lib/32000/32900/32972/6804-811292-050710-v1a.pdf>.

**TRAFFIC TECH** is a publication to disseminate information about traffic safety programs, including evaluations, innovative programs, and new publications. Feel free to copy it as you wish. If you would like to receive a copy, contact Angela H. Eichelberger, Ph.D., Editor, fax 202-366-7394, e-mail: [angela.eichelberger@dot.gov](mailto:angela.eichelberger@dot.gov).