

Factors Associated with Seat Belt Use Among U.S. Drivers and Passengers: A Mixed-Methods Study

INTRODUCTION

Seat belt use significantly reduces the risk of death and serious injury in a motor vehicle crash. Although about 91% of adult front seat occupants in the United States (U.S.) wear seat belts, those who do not account for nearly half of all traffic fatalities. Given the lifesaving benefits of seat belts and persistent gaps in use, traffic safety practitioners must better understand who does not wear their seat belt consistently, and when and why they do not. Research is needed to identify and explore demographic, psychological, and situational factors that are associated with inconsistent seat belt use. This information can help practitioners to implement tailored interventions that reach and resonate with groups who do not consistently wear seat belts. This study used a mixed-method approach to examine the factors associated with seat belt use among U.S. drivers and passengers. The objectives were to: (a) synthesize literature regarding seat belt use among U.S. drivers and passengers; (b) examine the characteristics of those who always, sometimes, and rarely use seat belts; and (c) identify recommended actions for traffic safety stakeholders to increase seat belt use.

METHODOLOGY

A literature review was conducted to explore the history of seat belts in the United States and identify the demographic and psychological factors associated with seat belt use or non-use. Next, an analysis of the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) identified the characteristics of U.S. drivers and passengers who had worn their seat belts in a crash resulting in a fatality compared to those who had not worn their seat belts. Finally, a survey on seat belt use behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making was developed and administered to a nationally representative sample of 2,818 U.S. adults. U.S. adults who never, rarely, or sometimes wear seat belts were oversampled.

KEY FINDINGS

Literature Review

The literature review revealed that seat belt use in the United States is high, but uneven across populations and circumstances, with persistent gaps by age, sex, seating position, vehicle type, roadway context, and risk-related

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ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

Founded in 1947, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and educational organization dedicated to saving lives by preventing traffic crashes and reducing injuries when crashes occur. Funding for this research was provided by voluntary contributions from AAA/CAA and their affiliated motor clubs, individual members, AAA-affiliated insurance companies, and other organizations or sources.

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behaviors. Specific groups are less likely to wear seat belts consistently: males, younger adults, rear seat passengers, occupants of pickup trucks, individuals traveling at night or on local and rural roads, and those engaging in alcohol or drug use and other risky behaviors. Psychological and social factors also play a role in shaping seat belt use decisions.

Fatal Crash Data Analysis

The analysis of FARS data from 2017 through 2022 found that more than one quarter of U.S. drivers and passengers (28%) involved in a crash resulting in a fatality in the past 30 days were not wearing their seat belt. Seat belt use was associated with age, police-reported alcohol and drug use, presence of a child in the vehicle, vehicle type, crash timing, road conditions, crash characteristics and violations, and geography.

National Survey

- The national survey revealed that most U.S. drivers (70.3%) and passengers (57%) reported always wearing a seat belt, while smaller shares of drivers and passengers reported wearing belts most of the time, but not always (12%, 15.9%), some of the time (15.2%, 20.8%), or rarely/never (2.5%, 6.3%).
- Drivers and passengers with greater odds of suboptimal seat belt use were male, from racial and ethnic minority groups (particularly non-Hispanic Black drivers), and those with lower educational attainment and lower household income.
- Higher numbers of impaired driving and riding behaviors were associated with lower seat belt use.
- Vehicle age was negatively associated with driver seat belt use while vehicle type was not associated with seat belt use.
- The most prevalent reasons for wearing a seat belt, endorsed by more than 90% of drivers and passengers who wore a seat belt some of the time, most of the time, or all of the time were “wanting to avoid serious injury or death,” “It’s the law,” and “It’s a habit.”

- The most prevalent reasons for not wearing a seat belt, stated by 30%–50% of those who wore a seat belt some of the time or rarely/never were “I’m only driving a short distance,” “I forget to put it on,” “I’m traveling on low-speed roadways.”

Road User Profiles and Recommendations for Traffic Safety Practitioners

Study findings were triangulated to empirically derive nine road user profiles representing groups of drivers and passengers with varying levels of seat belt use. Each profile contains recommended actions to increase seat belt use. These actions are informed by survey and market research data, feedback from an expert panel, and the literature. Traffic safety practitioners should find the information and guidance in the profiles helpful for their efforts to improve seat belt use and to tailor strategies to distinct groups of drivers and passengers.