

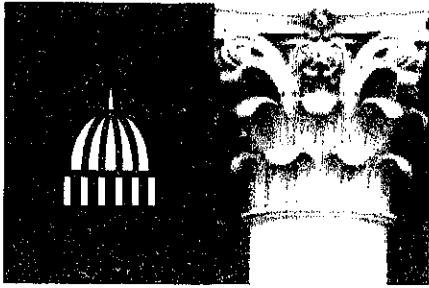
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Traffic Safety and Children: Booster Seats

By Melissa A. Savage

The leading cause of death, in America, for those between the ages of 6 and 33 is motor vehicle crashes. Every 13 minutes, someone in America dies from a traffic crash, and every 10 seconds someone is injured, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). On average, crashes cause about 41,000 deaths each year, which cost \$17 billion in medical care and \$107 billion in lost productivity and property loss. Every American shares that burden at about \$580 per person per year, NHTSA says.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of fatal, unintentional injuries for children between the ages of 4 and 14.

Children are one of the age groups affected most by traffic crashes. In fact, U.S. motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of fatal, unintentional injuries for children between the ages of 4 and 14. In 2001, 2,658 children under 16 died in car crashes—slightly lower than 2000 when 2,811 children died. The rate has dropped by nearly 50 percent over the past 25 years or so. The best way to ensure the safety of child passengers is to buckle them in an appropriate child safety seat or seat belt.

Booster seats are designed for children between 4 and 8 years and between 40 and 80 pounds. Many children outgrow safety seats when they reach 40 pounds, after which booster seats can be used. Some traffic safety advocates believe children should ride in booster seats until they weigh at least 80 pounds.

All 50 states have some form of child restraint law, and all are primary enforcement laws. One exception is Colorado—where the new booster seat law for children, 4 to 5, allows for secondary enforcement. The other is Nebraska—where the law is secondary only for children who may use seat belts, and standard or primary for those who must be secured in a child safety seat. Most states require the use of restraint systems for specific age groups.

There's a gap in safety for children who are too big for child safety seats, but too small for lap belts.

Gaps in Coverage. Some safety advocacy groups argue that there are gaps in coverage in some states. In some cases, laws fail to cover children in all seating positions or the law provides an exemption for out-of-state visitors. One noticeable gap identified by safety advocates is children who are too big for child safety seats, but too small to be safely secured by an adult-sized lap belt. Autumn Alexander Skeen and her 4-year-old son Anton were both buckled up using standard lap/shoulder belts in 1996, while visiting family in Yakima, Wash. When Autumn became distracted and lost control of her sport utility vehicle, Anton slipped out from under the seat belt and was thrown from the vehicle. He died instantly. Skeen made a common mistake in thinking that Anton was big enough to fit in the vehicle seat without a child safety seat. During the 2000 legislative session, the Washington Legislature passed Anton's Law, which requires children between 4 and 5 and between 40 and 60 pounds to ride secured in a booster seat.

Original Exhibit on file at the Legislative Council Bureau Research Library

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State Action

State legislatures consider hundreds of bills each year designed to strengthen existing child passenger protection laws. Thirteen states now have some type of booster seat law, although safety organizations argue that some laws are not strong enough. In a few states, for example, the law covers children up to only 40 pounds.

Arkansas, California and Washington were the first states to enact booster seat laws. California and Arkansas require children 5 years and younger or less than 60 pounds to ride in booster seats. Eighteen states considered bills that would have established similar provisions during the 2001 legislative sessions. Six states—Florida, Hawaii, New Jersey, Oregon, Rhode Island and South Carolina—passed laws. The laws in Florida and Hawaii were vetoed. Florida Governor Jeb Bush vetoed the bill citing, among other reasons, that requiring purchase of booster seats presented a financial hardship for needy families.

At least 15 states considered similar legislation during the 2002 legislative sessions. Six states—Colorado, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Nebraska and Virginia—passed some form of booster seat law. In Nebraska, a new law requires children under 5 to be seated in an appropriate child safety seat. Under a new law in Maine, children between 40 and 80 pounds and under 8 must ride in a safety system that elevates the child so that an adult seatbelt fits properly. Since these laws are relatively new, studies are currently under way to determine the effectiveness of booster seats.

Federal Action

Several safety organizations have started publicizing the need for older children to ride secured in booster seats. NHTSA recommends that all children 12 years old and under ride in the back seat, properly buckled into age-appropriate safety seats. A study recently conducted by NHTSA showed that only a little more than 6 percent of children who should be in a booster seat—according to age and weight guidelines—actually are. Because of this, NHTSA created a public education campaign—“Boost ‘Em Before You Buckle ‘Em”—to instruct people about booster seats and their use.

“All children who have outgrown child safety seats should be properly restrained in booster seats until they are at least 8 years old, unless they exceed 4’9” in height,” says Dr. Jeffrey Runge, NHTSA administrator. Whether the determination is based on height or weight, NHTSA firmly believes that children who are too big for traditional car seats are too small to be seated directly in the seat of the car using an adult shoulder/lap belt.

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National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
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Insurance Institute for Highway Safety
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National SAFEKIDS Campaign
<http://www.safekids.org>

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