



## Idaho Seatbelt Use Declining

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Idaho's seat belt use fell more than 3 percent during the past three years -- dropping from a high of nearly 80 percent in 2006, to 78.5 percent in 2007, and to 76.9 percent this year, according to a recent survey by the Idaho Transportation Department.

For the second consecutive year, seat belt use by occupants declined in all types of vehicles, including passenger cars, sport utility vehicles/vans and pickup trucks.

"So far this year, 68 unrestrained people have been killed in Idaho traffic crashes, and the majority of them were ejected from vehicles designed to protect them in a crash," said Mary Hunter, highway safety manager.

ITD and the state's public health districts conducted Idaho's official 2008 seat belt usage survey in June 2008, immediately following the statewide and national "Click It or Ticket" seat belt education and enforcement campaign.

More revealing of Idaho's seat belt use problem is that 65 percent of the occupants killed in Idaho traffic crashes during 2007 -- 114 people -- were not wearing seat belts. "Had they only buckled up, it is possible at least 57 of these people would be alive today," Hunter said.

Furthermore, 85 percent of passenger vehicle occupants killed in drunk driving crashes were not properly restrained.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), of all the safety features added to vehicles since 1960, seat belts account for more than half of the lives saved. Buckling up remains the single best defense against death or injury in the event of a crash.

Idaho is not eligible to receive federal incentive grant funds to address this issue because its seat belt and child passenger safety laws do not meet minimum federal grant standards, Hunter said.

In addition to those killed, 402 unbelted Idahoans were critically injured in 2007 traffic crashes. "At least half of these injuries could have been prevented with a simple click of a seat belt," Hunter said. "As seat belt use declines, costs to all Idahoans continue to increase."

"The Idaho state budget pays an estimated \$9 million in health care costs every year for traffic crash injuries which would have been prevented by seat belt use," said Dr. Beth Ebel, director of the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center in Seattle. "Idaho taxpayers subsidize those individuals who choose not to wear their seat belts despite the state law. In addition, Idaho passed up \$4.5 million in national highway funding for failing to strengthen enforcement of seat belt laws."

Ebel and her colleagues analyzed crash rates and seat belt use in Idaho, and estimated the medical cost of providing emergency and trauma care for belted and unbelted crash occupants.

Every Idahoan -- not the person involved in the traffic crash -- pays 85 percent of the medical bills associated with car crashes through insurance premiums, county, state and federal taxes, and increased charges for medical services, according to a NHTSA report titled, "The Economic Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes 2000."

Source: ITD

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