

**STATEMENT OF
Jack Gillis, Consumer Federation of America
December 16, 2004**

I am Jack Gillis, Director of Public Affairs of the Consumer Federation of America, and I also speak to you today as Consumer Co-Chair of Advocates. It will be my pleasure to share with you the specific polling research conducted in May of this year by Lou Harris for Advocates related to several traffic safety issues that are deliberated in state legislatures.

I remember when Lou Harris first did a poll for Advocates in 1996, he stood here at the National Press Club and said he was shocked at the extremely high levels of support for highway and auto safety issues, that never in his 40-year career had he seen such levels. In July of this year, Advocates released the first block of data from our Lou Harris poll that was primarily focused upon vehicle safety issues. Today we are releasing responses to several poll questions pertaining to safety issues considered in state legislatures, such as seat belt use, impaired driving and booster seat laws, just in time for the legislative season coming up. And these numbers also fall in Lou's category of "off the charts."

Copies of both the full set of survey questions and responses and a highlights summary are in the press kits.

I'd like to point out that one very important area – teen driving and graduated driver licensing – was not included in this year's poll, not because it wasn't important, but because our 2001 Harris survey had a special focus on the issue and we did not feel it was necessary to ask the questions again. The levels of support for GDL laws were high then, and they would likely be even higher if we had included the issue this year.

Poll Findings

The study focused on four key areas:

- 1) Enforcing seat belt use
- 2) Enforcement of laws to protect children
- 3) Cracking down on drunk drivers
- 4) Regulating traffic safety on community streets and roads

SEAT BELT ENFORCEMENT: Better than a 4-to-1 majority (80% to 19%) feels that "**seat belt laws** should be enforced just like any other traffic law," and 69% of Americans want public safety officials to give enforcing seat belt laws more attention. We still have to adopt primary enforcement belt laws in 29 states.

LAWS PROTECTING CHILDREN: There's been **an increase in support for booster seat laws** protecting children between the ages of four and eight. 84% of the American public is strongly in favor of such laws, an increase of 5 percentage points (79%) over 2001 when we asked the same question. Great progress has been made in the adoption of booster seat laws, but still, only 28 states protect 4-8 year old children, and most of those, only up to the age of 6. Data from State Farm's Partners for Child Passenger Safety research gives us clear direction on this issue – it's time for all states to do a better job of requiring proper restraint for this age group.

And an even greater margin – 90% - favor state laws that would make it illegal to leave **children unattended** in motor vehicles. Janette Fennell is in the audience today, president of KIDS and CARS, and she has done wonderful work in bringing this issue to the forefront.

DRUNK DRIVING: There is no doubt that the American people want to continue cracking down on **drunk driving**. 80% favor sobriety checkpoints, and a huge 92% say they favor impounding the cars of repeat drunk drivers. Again, 82% want installation of ignition interlocks for repeat offenders, which measure the level of alcohol in the blood before the driver can start the vehicle. Since alcohol is still involved in 40% of motor vehicle fatalities, we have a long way to go in this key area.

MOTORCYCLE HELMETS: The poll showed continuing high levels of support for all-rider motorcycle helmet laws, with 80% saying their state should have such a law. Unfortunately, many state legislatures have either repealed these laws in recent years, or have considered doing so, and we have seen alarming increases in motorcycling fatalities.

RECKLESS DRIVING ON LOCAL STREETS AND NEIGHBORHOODS: And last, we asked a series of questions about reckless driving on local streets in cities and towns:

- 80% say that **red light running** should receive more attention, and
- 79% felt that **speeding on local streets** needs more attention.
- Using **cell phones while driving** evokes 82% who say this practice needs more attention. Several states and localities, and many businesses have passed laws and ordinances that prohibit people from using cell phones while driving, but most allow a hands-free device.
- And when it comes to **intersections and pedestrians**, concerns are high, with 79% feeling that improving the safety of intersections needs more attention, and 71% wanting the environment to be made safer for pedestrians to cross the street.

Our state law report and Lou Harris poll show that when it comes to state highway safety laws, public opinion is strong but political will is weak.

Before I leave the podium, since we are talking about support, I want to take a minute to thank members of Advocates' board of directors for their ongoing support and hard work on behalf of these issues. In particular, a very special thanks goes to the insurance board members – we like to call them “**The A-Team,**” -- for their financial support for our extremely important advocacy program. These companies have been extraordinarily effective and dedicated to improving the public health of America. Without their support we could not continue our push for these tougher laws that will save, literally, thousands of lives once they are in place throughout the nation. I know our insurance board members are proud to be associated with Advocates, as we are with them, because together this unique coalition is truly making a difference.

A list of the consumer and insurance members of Advocates' board is in your press kits.