



MADD

Mothers Against Drunk Driving

PENNSYLVANIA STATE OFFICE

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DATE: JULY 13, 1998
FROM: PENNY W. STAVER, STATE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
TO: THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
RE: TESTIMONY SUBMITTED IN SUPPORT OF STANDARD SAFETY BELT LEGISLATION

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) strongly supports standard safety belt legislation. MADD recognizes that the best defense against drunk drivers is the use of safety belts.

In the United States more than 16,500 people are killed in alcohol-related crashes and more than a million are injured every year; that is, one person killed every 30 seconds. Last year, an estimated 391 people died in Pennsylvania due to preventable crashes involving alcohol.

In order to reduce tragic and preventable deaths and injuries such as these, it is essential we pass effective laws that are proven to save lives. Enactment of a standard safety belt law in Pennsylvania would be one of the most important actions this legislature could take to save lives in Pennsylvania.

Strong standard enforcement laws protect lives, reduce injuries, and can save our communities millions of dollars.

Seat belts are the most effective safety devices in vehicles today. If 90 per cent of Americans buckled up, we would prevent more than 5,500 deaths and more than 132,000 injuries each year.

Despite the lifesaving benefits of safety belts, only 68 percent of motor vehicle occupants are buckled.

Every hour another person dies because a safety belt wasn't buckled. In fact, failure to buckle up contributes to more fatalities than any other single traffic safety-related behavior. In 1996, more than 60 percent of the occupants killed in fatal crashes were unrestrained.

Data suggests that education alone will not do the job with young people, especially males age 16-25 -- the age group least likely to buckle up. They simply do not believe they will be killed or injured. Yet, they are the nation's highest risk drivers, with more drunk driving, more speeding, and more crashes.

- Page 2 -

Neither education nor fear of injury or death is strong enough to motivate this tough-to-reach group. Rather, it takes stronger seat belt laws and high visibility enforcement campaigns to get them to buckle up. Research has proven that many non-belt users actually fear citations accompanied with a significant fine more than they fear the possibility of being killed in a crash.

States with secondary enforcement laws average only 63 percent belt use. But states with standard enforcement seat belt laws average 78 percent belt usage -- 15 percentage points higher. Currently, only 14 states and the District of Columbia have standard safety belt enforcement laws.

Everyone would agree that protecting lives with seat belts is at least as important as fixing a broken tail light or putting an end to littering. Yet, while virtually every state has standard laws that allow law enforcement officers to stop and ticket a violator for having a broken tail light or for tossing trash out the window, not all states have standard seat belt use.

With nearly 1,000 Pennsylvanians killed each year in traffic crashes and the proven solution at hand, MADD urges the House Judiciary Committee to pass standard safety belt legislation. More than 80 percent of voters favor laws giving the police authority to stop and ticket a driver for not wearing a safety belt. It's time for Pennsylvania to listen to public opinion on this issue and enact this lifesaving law.

