

Attitudes Toward Seat Belt Use Among Urban & Rural Teens

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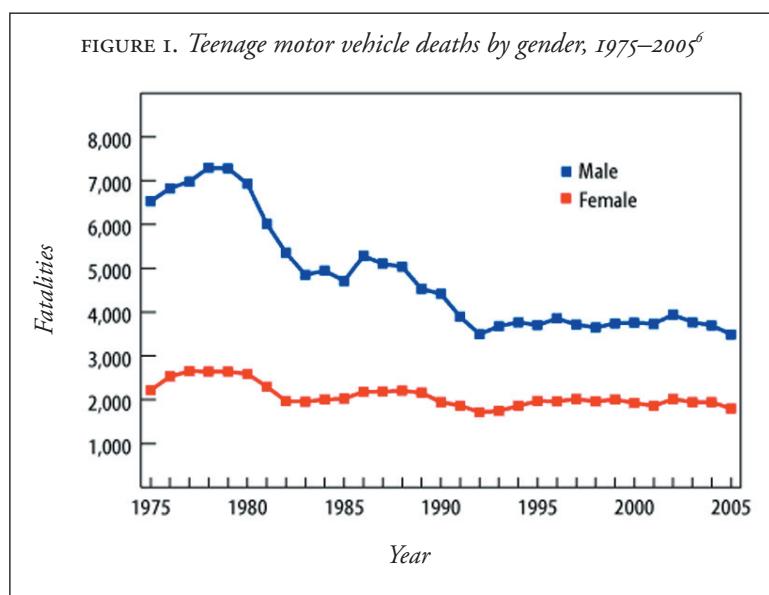
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INTRODUCTION

Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death among 15 to 20 year-olds in the United States. In Missouri, young drivers are involved in a disproportionate number of fatal traffic crashes. Recent surveys show that just 58 percent of teen drivers in Missouri regularly wear seat belts.¹ This is significant, because nearly 70 percent of those who die in traffic crashes in Missouri are not wearing their seat belt.² Nationally, there is a large variation in seat belt use among states. In 2005, 60.8 percent of drivers in Mississippi wore seat belts, the lowest rate in the nation, compared to a high of 95.3 percent in Hawaii. Missouri's overall seat belt usage rate in 2005 was 77.4 percent.³



NATIONAL DATA

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among 13–19 year-olds in the United States. Thirty-seven percent of all deaths among 13–19 year-olds in 2003 occurred in motor vehicle crashes, 42 percent among females and 34 percent among males.⁴

Teenagers drive less than drivers from nearly every other category, yet they are involved in proportionally more fatal crashes than other drivers. In 2005, teens accounted for about 10 percent of the U.S. population, but 12 percent of all motor vehicle crash deaths per vehicle mile traveled (VMT) were teens. The IIHS suggests that reasons for this phenomenon include immaturity combined with driving inexperience.

Young drivers tend to engage in more risky driving practices such as speeding and tailgating. When presented with road hazards, they lack the driving experience to negotiate the hazards safely. FIGURE 1 illustrates U.S. teenage motor vehicle deaths by gender from 1975 to 2005. The graph clearly shows that males make up more of the fatalities nationally than females. The fatality rate for both males and females peaked around 1978, before dropping and stabilizing over the succeeding 12 to 15 years.⁵

MISSOURI LAW

Drivers and passengers in motor vehicles in Missouri are required to wear a seat belt. However, Missouri is a secondary enforcement state, meaning that drivers and passengers in violation of the law can only be cited when the vehicle has been stopped by a police officer for a separate offense. In other words, a police officer in Missouri cannot stop and cite a driver or passenger solely for not wearing a seat belt.

¹Missouri Department of Transportation. "Young Driver Facts." Accessed online at <http://www.modot.mo.gov/safety/YoungDrivingFacts.htm>

²Missouri Department of Transportation. "Safety Belts and Child Safety Seats." Accessed online at <http://www.modot.mo.gov/safety/SafetyBeltsandChildSafetySeats.htm>

³Glassbrenner, Donna (2006). "Safety Belt Use in 2005 – Use Rates in the States and Territories." National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Traffic Safety Facts Research Notes. March, 2006.

⁴Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "Fatality Facts 2005: Teenagers." Accessed online at http://www.iihs.org/research/fatality_facts/teenagers.html

⁵Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "Fatality Facts 2005: Teenagers."

⁶Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "Fatality Facts 2005: Teenagers."



MISSOURI DATA

In Missouri, drivers under 21 make up 10 percent of licensed drivers. However, those same drivers are involved in 29 percent of the total number of traffic crashes reported in the state.⁷

To determine teen attitudes toward seat belt use, the Institute of Public Policy at the Truman School of Public Affairs conducted surveys of teens aged 15–18 from February 2006 through June of 2006. The surveys were conducted at Missouri State Highway Patrol driver exam facilities and high schools in a wide variety of locales across the state. A total of 923 teens participated in the survey.

Early in the survey, respondents were asked to answer a question about the last time they did not wear their seat belt when driving. A little over 45 percent of teens stated that they always wear their seat belt when driving. Six percent said they did not wear their seat belt one time in the past year. These responses show that less than half of the teenagers could be described as steady users of seat belts when driving. On the other hand, this also means that more than half of teenage drivers are not regular users of seat belts and there is room for significant improvement.

FIGURE 2. Most recent non-use of seat belts by teens as drivers by gender, 1975–2005

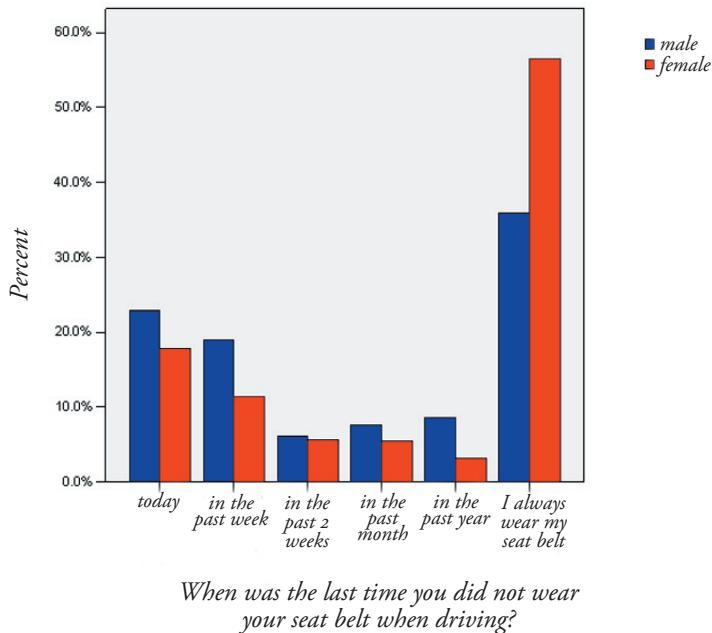


TABLE I. Most recent use of seat belts by urban & rural teens as drivers by gender

	Male		Female	
	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Today	22.1%	23%	19.6%	16.6%
In the past week	23.9%	17.3%	10.3%	11.7%
In the past 2 weeks	3.5%	8%	8.4%	4.9%
In the past month	8%	7.1%	7.5%	4.9%
In the past year	8%	8.8%	3.7%	2.8%
I always wear my seat belt	34.5%	35.8%	50.5%	59%
TOTAL	100%	100%	100%	100%

When examined by gender, the percentage of teen males that do not wear their seat belt regularly is much worse than the female percentage (see FIGURE 2). Only 36 percent of males stated they always wore their seat belt, compared with 56 percent of females. In every other category of less regular use, male teens have a higher percent than females, with an especially problematic difference of 8 percentage points on the “past week” category and a five percent gap in the “today” category. This demonstrates that teens in general are not wearing their seat belts enough, but it particularly

shows that teen males are at very high risk of not wearing a seat belt when involved in a motor vehicle crash.

TABLE I looks at teen seat belt use by gender, controlling for rural vs. urban zip codes. Respondents (n=729) answered the same question outlined in the graph above, “When was the last time you did not wear your seat belt when driving?” Among rural respondents, 46 percent of males answered that they had not worn their seat belt today or in the past week, compared to 40 percent of urban males. On the opposite

⁷Missouri Department of Transportation. “Young Driver Facts.”



TABLE 2. *Perceptions of legal consequences among rural & urban drivers by gender*

	<i>Male</i>		<i>Female</i>	
	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>
<i>Now, assume that you do not wear your seat belt at all for the next 6 months. How likely do you think you will be to receive a ticket for not wearing a seat belt?</i>	<i>Very unlikely</i>	20.1%	19.2%	7.4% 10.7%
	<i>Somewhat unlikely</i>	24.5%	20.4%	19.8% 20.8%
	<i>Somewhat likely</i>	31.7%	34.2%	43% 43.3%
	<i>Very Likely</i>	23.7%	26.2%	29.8% 25.2%
	TOTAL	100%	100%	100% 100%

end, urban females who responded that they always wear their seat belt outpaced their rural female counterparts by more than 8 percent (urban=59%, rural=50.5%). In general, female urban drivers exhibit the highest level of seat belt use, followed by rural female drivers. TABLE 1 further illustrates that male drivers are at the highest risk of not wearing a seat belt in the event of a crash.

In an attempt to explain the attitudes captured in TABLE 1, we examined the perceived consequences of seat belt non-use among urban and rural teen drivers by gender. TABLE 2 captures responses to the hypothetical question (n=857), "Now, assume that you do not wear your seat belt at all for the next six months. How likely do you think you will be to receive a ticket for not wearing a seat belt?" The threat of legal consequences was least effective on rural males, 44.6 percent of whom said it was unlikely they would receive a ticket. Coming in a close second were urban males at 39 percent. Conversely, the threat of legal consequences was most effective on female drivers, with 72.8 percent of urban and 68.5 percent of rural female drivers believing they would receive a ticket. TABLE 2 once again demonstrates that female drivers believe there is a higher likelihood of legal consequences for not wearing their seat belt than males.

CONCLUSION

Data obtained from the Missouri Department of Transportation (MODOT) show that teens are involved in a disproportionately high number of traffic crashes in the state. This provides an important context from which to view seat belt use rates and attitudes toward seat belt use among Missouri teens. Based on answers to two questions included in a survey of teen drivers, teenage male drivers wear their seatbelts less often than female teenage drivers and those teenage male drivers living in rural areas exhibit the lowest level of self-reported seat belt use. Urban teenage females report the highest level of seat belt use, followed by rural females. One factor explored in this paper to help understand this phenomenon is teen drivers' perceived likelihood of being ticketed for not wearing a seat belt. The results mirrored those from the first question. Rural males believed it unlikely that they would be ticketed for non-use of seat belts at a higher rate than urban males. Urban teenage female drivers believed they would be ticketed for non-use of seat belts at the highest rate, followed closely by

rural females. This paper suggests that, in general, teenage male drivers are at the highest risk with regard to seat belt non-use when involved in a crash, with rural males being the worst. Urban females are at the lowest risk. However, there is room for improvement among all Missouri teens and this information could be helpful in planning future education campaigns aimed at teenage drivers.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jeremy Diener recently graduated from the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri—Columbia with a degree in Public Management. Jeremy also earned a Bachelor of Journalism degree from MU and currently works in Corporate Relations for the University.

Dr. Lillard Richardson is Faculty Fellow with the Institute of Public Policy in the Harry S Truman School of Public Affairs.

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