

Point/Counterpoint

Questions and Statements Frequently Made by Opponents of Primary Enforcement Seat Belt Laws

QUESTION: Doesn't the state have more important things to do than to devote attention and resources to increasing seat belt use?

ANSWER: Traffic crashes are a leading threat to public health. Increasing seat belt use is still the single most effective and immediate way we can save lives and reduce injuries on America's roadways. Seat belts are estimated to save 11,000 lives in America each year. And those who don't buckle up are costing all of us in lost productivity and money.

QUESTION: Haven't public education campaigns done a good job of teaching the younger generations about seat belt safety? Don't we teach teenagers about seat belts and traffic crashes in driver education classes?

ANSWER: The facts show that education alone does not convince most young people to buckle up. Seat belt use declines from age five to about 25. For those at age 18, seat belt use is far below the national average. Why? Young people – especially young men ages 16–25 – simply do not think about being injured or killed. Yet they are the nation's highest risk drivers, with more impaired driving, more speeding and more crashes. For this tough-to-reach group, stronger belt laws, enforcement and the fear of losing their driver's license are effective when neither education nor fear of death or injury does the job.

QUESTION: Do we really need to make being unbuckled a primary offense? Isn't a secondary law sufficient for unbuckled drivers and passengers?

ANSWER: Although most states have a primary or standard law that allows law enforcement officers to stop and ticket a violator for having a broken taillight or for having an expired license tag, not all states have a primary seat belt use law. Experience has shown that upgrading to a primary enforcement seat belt law results on average in a 17 percentage point increase in seat belt use statewide – an indicator that secondary laws alone are not sufficient.

POINT: "I'm better off not wearing a seat belt because, in case of fire or submersion in water, I won't be able to escape."

COUNTERPOINT: Most crash fatalities result from the force of impact or from being thrown from the vehicle, not from being trapped. All studies show you are much more likely to survive a crash if you are buckled in. Ejected occupants are four times as likely to be killed as those who remain inside.

POINT: “I don’t need to wear a seat belt. My car has an airbag.”

COUNTERPOINT: Air bags are supplemental restraints and are designed to be used with seat belts. They help protect adults in a frontal crash, but they don’t provide protection in side or rear impact crashes or in rollovers. Seat belts are needed for protection in all types of crashes and work well with airbags to provide optimum safety. In fact, seat belts help prevent air bag injuries by keeping occupants away from deploying airbags.

POINT: “I have a right to chose not to wear a seat belt because, if I get hurt, the only one I’m hurting is myself.”

COUNTERPOINT: When someone is injured or dies in a traffic crash, society pays many of the costs, including emergency services, uninsured medical care, tax-supported rehabilitation programs, higher insurance costs, and survivor payments. In addition, a belted driver has a better chance of maintaining control of the vehicle in the event of a crash, protecting passengers and others on the road.

POINT: A primary seat belt usage law will contribute to the harassment of African Americans in traffic stops----also known as “Driving While Black (DWB)”.

COUNTERPOINT: Only nine percent of African Americans in primary law states report experiencing problems of any kind related to the seat belt law compared to 13 percent of African Americans in secondary law states. One percent report “a lot of problems”, 4 percent report “some problems”, and 6 percent report “a few problems”. Less than one half of one percent report race-related or harassment problems. The perception of racially motivated traffic stops is equally small in both primary and secondary law states. If primary seat belt laws contribute to racially motivated traffic stops and harassment of African Americans, people in states with primary laws should report more perceived problems and more racially motivated traffic stops. They do not. In fact, they report fewer problems in primary belt law states.