

Safety belts – reasons for not wearing and measures to increase wearing quotas

A safety belt is one of the most important means of improving the probability of survival and reducing the severity of injuries to vehicle occupants in the event of an accident. Although safety belts have been compulsory in Switzerland for many years, the wearing rate is far lower than in most neighbouring countries. At least 60 lives could be saved every year if all car occupants in Switzerland were to wear safety belts.



Problem and Objective

Of the 3,700 vehicle occupants killed between 1992 and 2002, at least 1,500 (40%) were not wearing safety belts. However according to existing regulations, the majority should have been belted in (exempted are, for example, drivers of lorries, tractors, buses and coaches). Around half of these – 1,500 people – would have survived had they been wearing safety belts. The 80% seat-belt-wearing quota in Switzerland is regrettably rather low in comparison to Germany and France. Furthermore, the wearing quota varies according to the region of the country and the type of road: it is highest in German-speaking Switzerland and on motorways. The wearing of safety belts has been compulsory for front-seat car occupants since 1981 and for back-seat occupants since 1994. Persons not wearing a safety belt are liable to a fine of CHF 60. This study should allow the formulation of options for increasing the seat-belt-wearing quota.

Procedure

10,000 questionnaires were distributed equally between men and women at the entrances to car parks and parking garages in the three different language areas of the country. A green or orange questionnaire was handed out, depending on whether the recipient was wearing a safety belt or not.

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Seat-belt wearing behaviour as described by those surveyed differed considerably from that actually observed (according to colour of questionnaire) – apparently a significant number of «non-wearers» did not want to admit to the fact. In further analysis, exclusive use was made of questionnaires where observed and reported safety-belt-wearing behaviours were consistent. The statements of this group could be regarded as the most trustworthy. There were not only significant differences between both groups in practically all questions concerning safety belts, but also in regard to several demographic features. The most important conclusions are as follows:

- The longer the interval between getting into the vehicle and fastening the safety belt, the greater the likelihood that it won't be fastened at all.
- People not wearing a safety belt at the time of the investigation admitted more frequently that they sometimes forget to wear one.
- Despite this fact, this group spoke out more often against being reminded of a safety belt by a sound or signal.
- Seat-belt wearers were more often accustomed to this from childhood.
- Non-wearers were – hardly surprisingly – more often against police controls and had been fined more often.
- Non-wearers are more likely to be from small communities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.
- Reasons given for not wearing a seat belt included laziness, clothes, which creased easily, and self-assessment as a safe driver.
- In contrast, seat-belt wearers feel less at ease without a seat belt than non-wearers.

An additional small survey carried out with major car manufacturers showed that technical developments amount to optimizing safety belts for wearers rather than increasing the belt-wearing quota. Nevertheless, many manufacturers have systems, which remind vehicle occupants of the safety belt by means of sound and light signals. Within the framework of EuroNCAP (comparison of vehicle crashworthiness), points were awarded for this type of reminder system, which could improve overall assessment.

An analysis of the Swiss Road Traffic Accident Statistics confirmed the well-known risk factors for suffering a serious accident while not wearing a seat belt: young (between 10 and 34); male; under the influence of alcohol; accident locations as the Lake Geneva region and Ticino; in towns and on state roads; time of accidents at night and above all at weekends. The safety belt was particularly rarely used in back seats. In contrast, wearer quota increased with winter road conditions.

From scientific literature, it emerges that use of safety belts can be significantly increased by intense, highly visible police controls backed by an accompanying campaign.

Conclusions

The number of fatalities on Swiss roads could be significantly reduced if all vehicle occupants were to wear a safety belt. Various measures should be adopted to achieve this goal, including:

- Introduction of a compulsory technical system as a reminder to fasten safety belts.
- Intensification of high-profile police controls combined with suitable campaigns, as well as concentration on times, circumstances and high-risk persons.
- Promotion of the use of child seats and children's safety belts, also – but not only – to make children more used to wearing a safety belt in the long term.
- Introduction of the belt-ignition-interlock as a penalty for repeat offenders.
- Campaign in the French-speaking region to promote awareness of laws of safety-belt wearing, as a considerable proportion of the population here lacks the relevant knowledge.
- Fewer exceptions to compulsory seat belt regulations in traffic laws.

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