

Occupant Protection Program - Problem Identification FY24 HSP

Seat belts are the single most effective traffic safety device for preventing death and injury in motor vehicle crashes. Yet over 290,000 Utahns still choose to ride unrestrained. According to 2017-2021 Utah crash data, unrestrained people account for only 2% of all occupants involved in crashes, but account for nearly 30% of all fatalities and 27% of all driver fatalities. Based on this data, it is estimated that at least 323 lives would have been saved if they made the choice to buckle up.

Utah Crash data from 2017-2021 shows that males of all ages are less likely than females to wear their seat belt. Of all motor vehicle occupants killed or injured in crashes, a high percentage of males were not buckled up. In fact, 64% of unrestrained drivers were male and over two-thirds of unrestrained occupant fatalities were male. The majority of unrestrained drivers and passengers were less than 48 years old; reporting 75% of drivers younger than 48 years, and passengers less than 31 years of age.

Young drivers are especially at risk; 35% of motor vehicle occupants killed or severely injured were ages 15-29. Tragically, only 63% of them were buckled up. Child passengers are also at risk, with 36% of fatalities among ages 0-8 years being reported as unrestrained.

Seat belt use is lower during the late night hours. Data shows that restraint use in crashes is lowest between midnight and 3:59 a.m. with 60% of occupants being unbuckled. This supports the need for nighttime seat belt enforcement as part of the occupant protection program.

When examining diverse populations, Hispanic and Latinos were found to have the highest unrestrained fatality rates among all minority groups. This is mainly due to the fact that they are the largest ethnic minority group making up 15.1% of the state's population. Over a five year period from 2017-2021, 29% of Hispanic occupants were unrestrained compared to 30% of non-Hispanic occupants. Similar to state and national trends, young males continue to be at higher risk for being killed in a traffic crash. Hispanic motorists ages 16-28 had the highest number of deaths and more than half were male.

Six of Utah's 29 counties are considered urban, contributing to 85% of the state's population and 23 are rural. When examining the differences between urban and rural counties using crash data from 2017-2021, it was determined that more than half (58%) of unbuckled fatalities occur in rural counties. Urban counties, which include Cache, Davis, Salt Lake, Utah, Washington and Weber contribute to 42% of unrestrained occupant fatalities.

Each year, a statewide survey is conducted observing the driver and front seat passenger seat belt use. The 2022 seat belt observational study reported 91.8% use, a 3.6% increase from the 2021 survey. Males continue to buckle up less often than females with seat belt use lower in rural counties compared to urban counties. Pick-up truck occupants had the lowest seat belt usage rate at 84.4% (81.2% in rural counties) while SUVs had the highest rate at 95%.

The crash data and observational survey provide evidence that focus should be placed on males, pick-up trucks, and rural counties. Seat belt enforcement and outreach efforts should focus on these groups. Additionally, when a driver was restrained, passenger restraint use was 97.4%. When a driver was unrestrained, passenger restraint use was only 43.5%. This supports the importance of leading by example and influencing others' traffic safety behavior by buckling up every time.

Teen Driving Program

Each year we mourn the loss of too many young people due to poor decisions on our roads. For instance, in 2021, 38 teen drivers were involved in a fatal crash on Utah's roads; a total of 45 people were killed in these crashes, including 17 of the 38 teen drivers.

The risk of motor vehicle crashes is higher among those 16-19 years old than in any other age group. In fact, per mile driven, teen drivers aged 16-19 were nearly three times more likely than drivers aged 20 and older to be in a fatal crash. The fatal crash rate per mile driven was nearly twice as high for teens aged 16-17 as it was for 18-19 year-olds (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Highway Loss Data Institute).

From 2017-2021, teenage drivers accounted for 21% of all crashes and 22.7% of all injuries. During that same period, 1,389 people died on Utah roads. Of that number, 179 people lost their lives as a result of a teenage driver-involved crash; 103 of those people were teenagers. Over the last 5 years, 130 teens lost their lives in traffic crashes in Utah. Of the 130 killed, 68% were male, 53% of crashes occurred on a weekend, and 53% of crashes occurred in an urban area.

Teenage drivers represent an extremely high-risk factor on the roads because of their high crash rates and lack of driving experience. Teen crash risk is impacted by developmental and behavioral issues coupled with inexperience. Over 90% of teen crashes happen in the first few months of receiving a driver license. In addition, fatal crashes increase by nearly 45% when a 16 or 17-year-old driver has one teenage passenger; it doubles with two teen passengers and quadruples with three or more (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety).

The number of teenage crashes compared to other ages is significantly disproportionate; thus, it is important to educate about seat belt use, teach skills to teen drivers and increase parental involvement. According to Zero Fatalities questionnaires, teens report that when their parents monitor their activities in a helpful, supportive way, they are half as likely to speed and two times more likely to wear seat belts. Parents play an important role in forming a teen's driving habits.