

# **Safety Belt Enforcement IS Law Enforcement**

Excerpts from NHTSA, Mid-Atlantic Regional Occupant Protection Summit,  
Hershey Pennsylvania, April 2005

NHTSA Headquarters Regional Operations Staff started off the summit with some very interesting facts and several questions. They started by sharing the good and the bad news of our safety belt enforcement efforts. But even amidst the good news, they highlighted that there is more that needs to be done. The following outlines this presentation.

First, three questions were asked:

1. How well are we doing, in traffic safety, here in the Mid-Atlantic States? Specifically, where are we doing pretty well, and where do we have to do better?
2. What's making the difference? Where we are doing well, how are we doing it? Where do we need to do better, what exactly do we have to do to get better?
3. And finally, why *is* traffic law enforcement good law enforcement? How is it that writing safety belt tickets, citing speeders and arresting drunk drivers furthers the basic law enforcement mission of protecting and serving the public?

## ***So first, how are we doing, overall?***

Overall, we're doing pretty well.

In 2003, the most recent year for which we have complete statistics, we reached the lowest traffic fatality rate in this nation's history — just under one and one-half deaths for every 100 million miles of vehicle travel. Way back in 1966, when the U.S. DOT was formed, our national traffic fatality rate was five and one-half deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles. In other words, on any given car trip, an American four decades ago was nearly four times more likely to be killed in a crash than we are today. Can you think of any other routine activity that is four times safer now than it was in the mid-sixties?

It's a very good thing that we have reduced the traffic fatality rate by this huge amount, because we Americans do **a lot** of driving. Every day of the year, the 292 million or so people in this country collectively drive nearly **eight billion miles**. That's BILLION, with a "B." That is more than a daily round trip, from Earth to Pluto and back.

If we were still killing people at the same rate as in 1966, last year over 160,000 Americans would have died in crashes. Instead, approximately 43,000 died. That's still way too many, but it is much better than it would have been, if we had not improved as much as we have. The real good news, for us here, is that we are doing even better in the Mid-Atlantic States than the nation is as a whole.

As mentioned, the national death rate dipped just below one and one-half fatalities for every 100 million miles in 2003. **Our goal is to get to no more than one death per 100 million miles by 2008.** To do that, we have to hope that, when the final numbers for 2004 come in, we'll find that the national fatality rate dropped below 1.4 deaths.

Guess what? The Mid-Atlantic region got there in 2003. You have made motor vehicle travel safer here than in the rest of the country as a whole! You pushed safety belt use in our five states and D.C. up above the national average. It took a while to get there — for several years we lagged behind. It took a lot of hard work, by a lot of officers, troopers and deputies. But thanks to that work, we're once again out front, and we have absolutely no intention of slipping back.

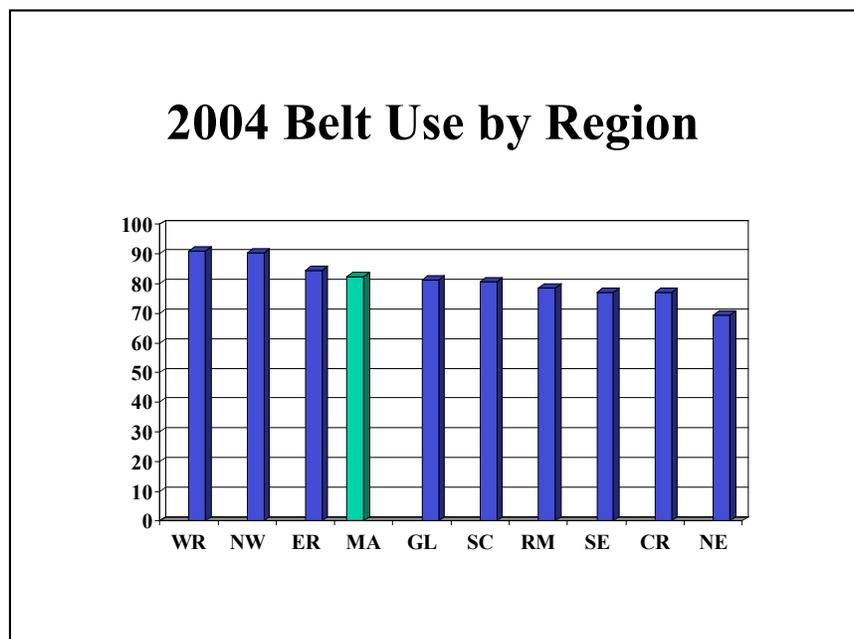
We're moving ahead compared to other regions, too. As you know, NHTSA breaks the country up into ten regions. We used to call them by numbers, but now we use names. Our name is the Mid-Atlantic Region. Others are called New England, Great Lakes, Rocky Mountain, and so on.

The last time this region's Occupant Protection Law

Enforcement Summit was held in Hershey was four years ago. Back then, our region was in 6th place among all regions, with a safety belt use rate of just over 72 percent. Now we are ten points higher, and in 4th place. We have the Eastern Region – New Jersey, New York and Puerto Rico – in our sights, and we can catch them this year.

Here's something even more impressive: We are leading the league when it comes to converting non-belt users to users.

Last year, because of the tremendous effort you put into the *Click It or Ticket* mobilization, you convinced one out of every six people who weren't buckling up to start buckling up. No other region came close to that achievement. And folks, these are **lifesaving** conversions. So to answer the question, how are we doing? Or really, how are YOU doing? You're doing pretty darn well, and in fact you've been doing better and better each year.



**Now, how are you pulling this off? What are you doing that is working so well? And, where do you have to do even better?**

What's working so well is crystal clear. High visibility enforcement is what is working. For years in this country, we tried **education** as the method for convincing people to buckle up. We pitched the message that *seat belts save lives*. We pitched that message in driver education classes, in

public service announcements on radio and TV, at safety conferences around the country, and in every which way we could.

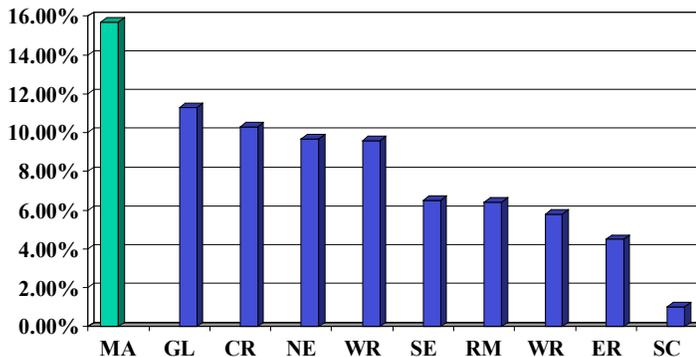
And you know what? That message worked, for some people. It worked for about half of the people in this country. Through education, we pushed the safety belt use rate up to about 50%. Then it stayed there.

The rest of the country needed a different message. You proved that the message they needed was *Click It or Ticket*. Most of them, by now, have gotten the message. But there are still some who haven't, and that's why we're still here working to gain more safety belt use.

When we say high visibility safety belt enforcement works, that's not just an opinion, it is based on facts. Each year, we ask states to report to us on their enforcement activity during the *Click It or Ticket* mobilization. Most give us information, including the number of belt tickets issued. Based on the observed safety belt use rates that the states also report, we calculate the odds that the average non-belt user faces of getting a ticket, state by state.

Last year, six states and Puerto Rico had belt use rates above 90%. Their ticketing rates ranged from a low of about 10 out of every 1,000 non users in Arizona to nearly 80 out of each 1,000 in Puerto Rico. On the other hand, there were nine states with belt use rates below 70%. Their ticketing rates went from a high of less than 6 per 1,000 in North Dakota, to exactly zero in New Hampshire (which doesn't have a safety belt law for anyone older than 17). Clearly, if you write a lot of tickets, you get high belt use.

## 2003-2004 Conversion Rates by Region



Another way to look at this is to compare how the ten regions stack up in terms of belt use rates and ticketing rates. The top four use rates also have the top four ticketing rates — not in exactly the same sequence, but pretty close. Numbers 5, 6 and 7 in terms of use rate are also 5, 6 and 7 in ticketing rate. And, the bottom 3 use rates also produce the three lowest ticketing rates. A statistician would say this is a very tight correlation.

Simply said: **Write a lot of tickets, and see belt use go up!** Don't write so many tickets, and see belt use stay flat or even drop. And don't let anyone tell you you're not doing your job when you have your people out there enforcing safety belt and impaired driving laws. Bear in mind that these numbers are conservative estimates, because we don't hear from many agencies that actively participate in the mobilizations. Even so, these numbers make it very clear: Crooks drive cars when they commit crimes. And crooks are stupid enough to drive away from their crimes drunk and unbuckled. And our young women and men in uniform catch them because they're drunk and unbuckled! **There's no denying that good traffic law enforcement is, bottom line, good law enforcement.** But the ultimate purpose for good traffic law enforcement is not to catch crooks, or even to write tickets. It's great to see high numbers of tickets in our *Click It or Ticket* mobilizations — that is a good indication that you are doing your job — but the tickets and the other arrests that result are only indicators. They are not the job itself; the job is saving lives. Obviously, our greatest concern is that people are dying in crashes. Every crash death is a tragedy, and we want to prevent all of them.

### **But we have to ask ourselves, who is *most* at risk?**

Where are we losing the most lives? Where do we have the greatest potential to save lives? In other words, where do we have to concentrate our efforts to do an even better job than we have been doing? Traffic crashes kill *disproportionately*. They snuff out the promise of decades to come among those who are just poised to taste life fully: **teens and young adults.**

It has been said that the most dangerous move a 15-year old American kid can make is to turn 16. In the first decade of life, we lose about 3 out of every 100,000 children to traffic crashes each year. Among pre-adolescents and early teens, this climbs to a bit over 5 out of 100,000. But turn 16, and the odds of getting killed jump by a factor of 6. More than 30 out of 100,000 young people between 16 and 20 years of age die in crashes, every year. If they manage to live through those five years, the odds get steadily better over the next 4-5 decades. *We must* do everything we can to help them make it.

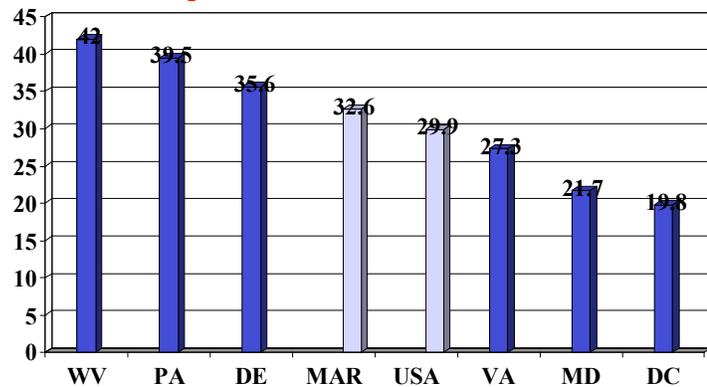
The prospects are especially grim among males in general, and young males in particular. Averaged across the entire life span, males are about twice as likely as females to end their lives in crashes. But a boy turning from 15 to 16 sees his odds of getting killed multiply by 7. His sister or girlfriend sees hers go up nearly five-fold.

Unfortunately, the risk to young people is somewhat worse in our Region than in the country as a whole. For the whole country, the fatality rate for teenage drivers is about 30 out of every 100,000. In the Mid-Atlantic Region, it is closer to 33.

West Virginia, Pennsylvania and Delaware have teenage driver fatality rates that are somewhat higher than the national and regional averages; Virginia's, Maryland's and DC's rates are somewhat lower.

## Comparing the Country to the Mid-Atlantic States

*Deaths per 100,000 licensed drivers*



**16-19 year old driver fatality rates, 2003**

But regardless of where they live, when teens enter the driving age, their risk of getting killed in a crash increases dramatically. Why is this age group so terribly at risk? You already know the answer; the failure to buckle up is part of that answer.

“Common sense” tells us that senior citizens, who grew up before cars had belts, are the people least likely to buckle up.

“Common sense” tells us that, since today’s kids have been exposed regularly to in-school lessons on belts and safety beginning in kindergarten, they certainly have formed the buckle-up habit.

However, “common sense” is wrong. Late teens and twenty-something’s **don’t** buckle up as often as older Americans do. In large part, that’s because they don’t believe death or dismemberment can ever happen to them.

Clearly, we have to focus more of our high visibility enforcement efforts on young drivers and their passengers. We are already doing that with our paid advertising campaign. We must rely on you to make sure that the actual enforcement also impacts young people with special force. I’d like to suggest some ways of doing that. Those of you in traffic law enforcement, and those of us who try to back you up with resources and publicity are out to steer public perception in a new direction. By and large, we have already succeeded in convincing most

Americans. Those are the people who are smart enough to perceive that riding unbuckled can get them killed.

Now we have to convince the harder to reach people, who don't believe that death and dismemberment on the highway will ever happen to them. This group contains a disproportionate share of teens and young adults. We have to make them perceive that unbuckled driving will get them stopped, ticketed and punished. Research tells us that a major motivator for this population is fear of a ticket and/or license suspension. Visibility is the key here. The more they **see** you out there, the more they **hear about** you out there, the sooner they will perceive that they will get caught.

**Checkpoints** have been an especially popular and effective traffic law enforcement strategy here in the Mid-Atlantic Region. The *Checkpoint Strikeforce* campaign has become a model for sustained enforcement of drinking driving violations. Checkpoints work for safety belt enforcement, too. They can even work simultaneously for belt and DWI enforcement. One problem with checkpoints is that not too many people see or encounter them. That's because they are often held late at night. Doing some checkpoints in the evening hours will get the attention of more people, and very likely more teens, than will checkpoints at 1:00 or 2:00am. Evening checkpoints will also provide a means of transitioning more of our attention to nighttime belt enforcement. And checkpoints aren't the only way to do it.

**Saturation patrols**, where a lot of patrol vehicles are deployed in a limited geographic area, create a public perception that you are everywhere.

Delaware deserves a round of applause for pioneering multi-agency enforcement teams that saturated the State with Click It or Ticket for two straight weeks. It worked quite well: belt use went up over 7 points.

**The Enforcement Zone** is another high visibility technique that is gaining in popularity. These were invented in Chicago, Indianapolis and other areas of the Mid-West. The enforcement zone is a modern application of old fashioned foot patrol. The zone is conducted at a controlled intersection (stop sign or traffic light) or other locations where traffic moves slowly. Prominent signs are placed upstream of the location, advising motorists that they are entering a safety belt Enforcement Zone. As the vehicle approaches the intersection and slows to a stop, and officer on foot assesses the occupants to detect a violation, and orders the driver to pull over when appropriate. The media love to cover enforcement zones. I highly recommend conducting some enforcement zones near high schools next month, to catch unbuckled teens heading to and from school.

**Bottom line:** any enforcement strategy will work, as long as it's visible.

We are on the right track ... but we have to focus more on teens and young adults.

High visibility enforcement is making the difference ... and we have to start moving more of it, focused on safety belts, to nighttime hours. Traffic law enforcement absolutely fulfills the fundamental purpose of good law enforcement: it protects and serves the public.

Specifically, it saves their lives. As a bonus, it also catches crooks.

Stick with what you have proven to work. You are on the right track. Stay the course.

We really need to make this year's Click It or Ticket campaign the biggest and most effective mobilization ever.

This is almost certainly the last year in which the States will receive millions in grant funds specifically targeted to Click It or Ticket. Next year, and in the years to come, the States will continue to receive millions in highway safety funding, but it does not appear that Congress will require that any specific portion of those funds be applied to Click It or Ticket.

We need to seize this opportunity to produce iron-clad, compelling evidence that Click It or Ticket works, so that all States will elect to continue to fund it, until we have achieved the ultimate goal of virtually universal belt use. The only ones who can produce that evidence are the officers, deputies and troopers in this room, and the tens of thousands of their sisters and brothers in uniform throughout our Mid-Atlantic States.

We're counting on you once again. We know you won't let us down.

### So to sum up .... *Today's Simple Answers*

- How well are we doing?      • *Pretty darn well, but we must do more to save kids!*
- What's making the difference?      • *Highly visible enforcement, especially of belts!*
- Why is it good law enforcement?      • *Because it protects and serves, and also catches crooks!*