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SAFETY BELT ATTITUDES AMONG RURAL PICKUP TRUCK DRIVERS

Occupants of pickup trucks consistently have lower safety belt usage rates than occupants of automobiles, vans, and sport utility vehicles (SUVs). According to NHTSA's 2003 National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), the observed safety belt use rate is 69 percent for occupants of pickup trucks compared to 83 percent for Vans and SUVs, and 81 percent for Passenger Cars. Occupants of pickup trucks are at a higher risk for serious injury or death given their lower safety belt usage and higher ejection rates.

Belt Use by Vehicle Type, 1998-2003

	Passenger Cars	Vans & SUVs	Pickup Trucks
Fall 1998	71%	70%	59%
Fall 2000	74%	74%	59%
June 2001	76%	75%	62%
June 2002	77%	78%	64%
June 2003	81%	83%	69%

Source: NCSA, 2003

The Center for Applied Research conducted eight focus groups with younger and older male pickup truck drivers who live and work in the rural areas of four different states for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Three of the states (Georgia, Michigan, and Texas) have primary safety belt laws where an officer may write a citation whenever a motorist is observed not wearing a safety belt. One state (Montana) has a secondary belt law where law enforcement officers must first stop a driver for some other reason before issuing a citation for not wearing a safety belt. Two of the focus groups in Texas were comprised of Hispanic males.

Reasons Given for Not Wearing Safety Belts

The men who participated in these focus groups gave reasons why they do not wear their safety belts in their pickup trucks. They feel that the size of their vehicle protects them and that safety belts are not necessary for short trips or work-related trips. Some said they feared being trapped in the vehicle by the safety belt after a crash.

The participants pointed out inconsistencies between state safety belt laws and laws for other highway safety areas. One example given was that some states lack motorcycle helmet laws but require safety belt use. Some of the men in these focus groups gave this example as a justification for ignoring the safety belt law; others said the government should not mandate safety belt use.

Reasons Given for Wearing Safety Belts

The men indicated that they do wear their safety belts when family or friends are with them, or when they are traveling on interstates, in large cities, or in inclement weather (where they perceived the risk of a crash to be greater). Interestingly, many of the participants said they did wear safety belts when traveling in a passenger car, but not in their pick up trucks.

Future Campaign Emphasis

New campaign development should target where and why male pickup truck drivers in rural areas of the U.S. do not wear safety belts. Highway safety specialists should design new campaigns that emphasize crash fears and concerns that were repeatedly voiced by most of the participants.

The Hispanic men and all of the younger men were not concerned about dying in a crash; messages for these men should not show crashes that are so severe that survival in any event would be questionable. Instead, message themes about crash fears should emphasize paralysis and wheelchair use, loss of limb, and impact on family including feelings of sadness about leaving family behind.

Whether young or old, the men were not impressed with statistical facts as a motivator to increase safety belt use. Most of the men agreed that federal, state, and local governments could use numbers to prove whatever point they choose to make.

Educational efforts and campaigns should address these topics:

- Low speed crashes--show crash damage and travel speed without the use of safety belts
- Airbags--ejection and rollovers without the use of safety belts
- Short Trips
- Deciding to wear a safety belt all the time versus deciding when to wear the safety belt
- The "habit" of wearing a safety belt
- Get used to the feel of the belt; develop countermeasures for discomfort
- The "mind set" of freedom to choose to wear a safety belt
- Evolution of DWI laws and societal acceptance compared to safety belt use acceptance
- Hispanic and youth "fate" issues

New messages and campaigns should use realism:

- Be short and to the point
- Show consequences to family
- Show every day events, local areas, real people
- Film messages in rural communities
- Use spokespersons from the local community; celebrities are not recommended
- Show real people who have been in crashes
- Use First Responders who have gone to crash scenes
- Stress "medical consequences" (for Hispanic and younger male audiences)
- Show the possibility of survival if safety belt had been used in a violent crash
- Film and record Hispanic versions that are not just language translations, but incorporate Hispanic culture as well
- If statistics are used, framing is important; for example, use "1 out of 3", not 33%
- Avoid humor; participants interpreted humorous messages as sarcastic

HOW TO ORDER

To order *Focus Groups With Pickup Truck Drivers About Safety Belts*, (35 pages), prepared by the Center for Applied Research, write to the office of Research and Technology, NHTSA, NTI-130, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590, fax (202) 366-7096 or download from <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/> Paula Bawer was the contract manager.

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