



NEWS RELEASE

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La. pickup truck occupants remain lowest seat belt users

New state survey finds overall seat belt use falls slightly

BATON ROUGE—Three out of four Louisiana motorists in front seats are buckling up, but drivers and passengers in pickup trucks continue to have the lowest usage rates for the life-saving devices, according to a 2009 survey conducted for the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

In observational studies conducted in June and July 2009, 75 percent of all drivers and front-seat passengers were buckled up, a decline of one percentage point from the 2008 rate. Highway safety officials believe Hurricane Gustav may have contributed to the 2009 decline in seat belt use. Louisiana's seat belt use rate fell by three percentage points in the year following Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The three geographic regions that experienced the highest declines in seat belt use in the latest survey are in south Louisiana areas impacted by Hurricane Gustav.

Statewide, drivers and front-seat passengers in SUVs buckled up at a rate of 77 percent—the highest use for any type of vehicle included in the survey. Unfortunately, pickup truck drivers buckle up far less, at 71 percent, and make up a large portion of Louisiana vehicles. An increase in the compliance rate among this vehicle type would significantly raise the number of crash survivors.

Seat belt use in Louisiana has traditionally lagged behind the national average. The national average seat belt use rate in 2007 was 82 percent. Louisiana has what is called a “primary enforcement” law, which means that officers can stop and ticket people they observe violating the seat belt law.

“Recent efforts in Lake Charles and Alexandria have resulted in an increase in seat belt usage in both areas and we are taking steps statewide that we expect will get us back on track,” said Lt. Col. John LeBlanc, executive director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission. “Over the next year we are going to encourage more enforcement and will increase our level of advertising messages to motorists in the areas that experienced declines in seat belt use.”

The Louisiana Highway Safety Commission conducts campaigns throughout the year that focus on convincing motorists to buckle up. The 2008-09 campaigns, called “Click It or Ticket,” featured increased enforcement made possible through grants provided by the LHSC, advertisements, and

outreach through the news media. LeBlanc credits the LHSC's campaigns and new laws with increasing seat belt use in Louisiana from 12 percent in 1986 to 75 percent in 2009.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, seat belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injuries by 50 percent. About 65 percent of the people killed in crashes in Louisiana in 2008 were not buckled up.

Observers at 416 locations across Louisiana conducted the LHSC's 2009 seat belt use survey. A total of 73,785 drivers and front-seat passengers were observed at the 416 locations. Observations were made on drivers and passengers in privately owned vehicles to which the state's seat belt law applied.

Previous Louisiana law required that front-seat occupants wear seat belts, and children under the age of 13 wear a seat belt and/or be restrained by an appropriate child safety seat regardless of seating position. The state's new occupant protection law, effective August 2009, requires all vehicle passengers—including those in rear seats—wear seat belts or be secured in an age-appropriate child restraint.

Seat belt use by region in the 2009 survey was as follows:

Lake Charles	77 percent
Alexandria	77 percent
Lafayette	76 percent
Houma/Thibodaux	76 percent
Baton Rouge	75 percent
New Orleans	74 percent
Shreveport	72 percent
Monroe	71 percent

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