

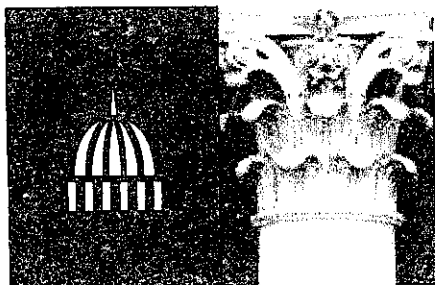
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Traffic Safety and Children: Booster Seats

By Melissa A. Savage

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of fatal, unintentional injuries for children between the ages of 4 and 14.

The leading cause of death, in America, for those between the ages of 6 and 33 is motor vehicle crashes. Every 13 minutes, someone in America dies from a traffic crash, and every 10 seconds someone is injured, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). On average, crashes cause about 41,000 deaths each year, which cost \$17 billion in medical care and \$107 billion in lost productivity and property loss. Every American shares that burden at about \$580 per person per year, NHTSA says.

Children are one of the age groups affected most by traffic crashes. In fact, U.S. motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of fatal, unintentional injuries for children between the ages of 4 and 14. In 2001, 2,658 children under 16 died in car crashes—slightly lower than 2000 when 2,811 children died. The rate has dropped by nearly 50 percent over the past 25 years or so. The best way to ensure the safety of child passengers is to buckle them in an appropriate child safety seat or seat belt.

Booster seats are designed for children between 4 and 8 years and between 40 and 80 pounds. Many children outgrow safety seats when they reach 40 pounds, after which booster seats can be used. Some traffic safety advocates believe children should ride in booster seats until they weigh at least 80 pounds.

All 50 states have some form of child restraint law, and all are primary enforcement laws. One exception is Colorado—where the new booster seat law for children, 4 to 5, allows for secondary enforcement. The other is Nebraska—where the law is secondary only for children who may use seat belts, and standard or primary for those who must be secured in a child safety seat. Most states require the use of restraint systems for specific age groups.

There's a gap in safety for children who are too big for child safety seats, but too small for lap belts.

Gaps in Coverage. Some safety advocacy groups argue that there are gaps in coverage in some states. In some cases, laws fail to cover children in all seating positions or the law provides an exemption for out-of-state visitors. One noticeable gap identified by safety advocates is children who are too big for child safety seats, but too small to be safely secured by an adult-sized lap belt. Autumn Alexander Skeen and her 4-year-old son Anton were both buckled up using standard lap/shoulder belts in 1996, while visiting family in Yakima, Wash. When Autumn became distracted and lost control of her sport utility vehicle, Anton slipped out from under the seat belt and was thrown from the vehicle. He died instantly. Skeen made a common mistake in thinking that Anton was big enough to fit in the vehicle seat without a child safety seat. During the 2000 legislative session, the Washington Legislature passed Anton's Law, which requires children between 4 and 5 and between 40 and 60 pounds to ride secured in a booster seat.