

## CALL TO ACTION

The strategy for improving child occupant protection in this nation is multifaceted, well understood and well underway by SAFE KIDS coalitions and many other advocates. These efforts now must be expanded and sustained over the next decade. They include:

- Closing gaps in existing child occupant protection laws. These laws, which typically require only children ages 3 and under to ride properly restrained, vary widely in their age requirements, exemptions, enforcement procedures and penalties.
- Upgrading safety belt laws to include primary enforcement provisions. Only 17 states and the District of Columbia currently have primary (standard) enforcement safety belt laws. States with primary laws average 15 percent higher restraint usage rates than those with secondary laws, in addition to lower fatality and injury rates.<sup>iii</sup>
- Better educating caregivers about the increased risk of death or serious injury for unrestrained children.
- Better informing caregivers about the importance of using the appropriate restraints, with a focus on belt-positioning booster seats.
- Continuing targeted outreach to at-risk populations, using culturally appropriate messages and materials.
- Supporting more child safety seat distribution programs in communities in need.

<sup>i</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration National Center for Statistics & Analysis. Traffic safety facts 2000: Children. Washington (DC): U.S. Department of Transportation, 2001.

<sup>ii</sup> Research data from the Crash Injury Research & Engineering Network (CIREN) supported by the United States Department of Transportation under Contract No. DTNH22-00-H-37202. The findings contained herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of NHTSA.

<sup>iii</sup> National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Legislative fact sheet: strengthening seat belt use laws. In: Campaign Safe & Sober: youth traffic safety programs: 3rd quarterly planner. Washington (DC): U.S. Department of Transportation, August 1994.

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Founded by



National SAFE KIDS Campaign  
1301 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20004

tel 202-662-0600  
fax 202-393-2072

[www.safekids.org](http://www.safekids.org)



# CHILD PASSENGERS AT RISK IN AMERICA:

## A National Study of Restraint Use

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## INTRODUCTION

When it comes to buckling up, effecting behavioral change across an entire society happens gradually and is indisputably best accomplished through ongoing education, good laws and strong enforcement. These efforts have had favorable results with child occupants of motor vehicles in the United States. Restraint usage rates have dramatically improved in the past decade. Yet many children remain inadequately protected.

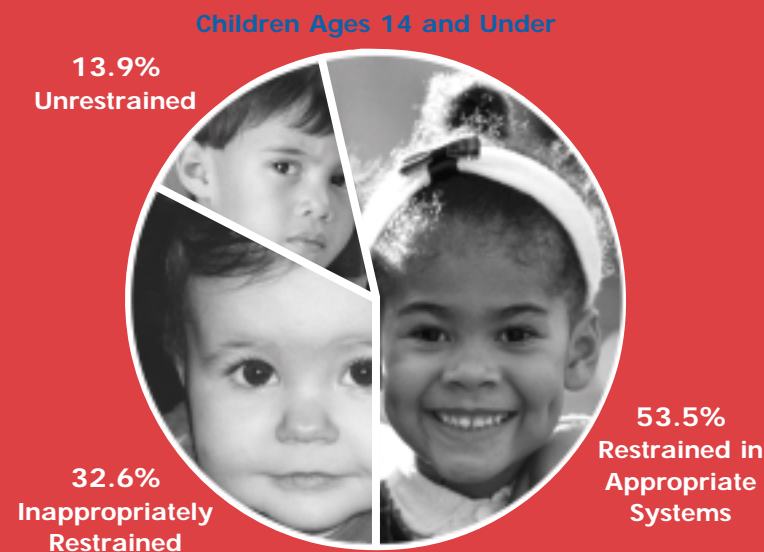
Motor vehicle crashes are still the leading killer of kids ages 1 to 14, and the traffic safety community now faces the hard-core problem of those who seem impervious to the warnings and sanctions related to nonuse of child restraints. We know that restraint use dramatically affects the survivability of a crash. In fact, in 2000, 56 percent of children ages 14 and under who were fatally injured in a crash were completely unrestrained.<sup>i</sup> The sight of kids unbuckled at an intersection angers and confounds us. Exactly how many of these children are out there? Why? And what are their caregivers thinking? Personal testimonies found in the literature and in offender classes are many: “We were only going for a short ride,” “He just won’t stay in a seat,” “I am not the child’s parent,” “I just didn’t realize,” or “I don’t have enough seats.” But none of these excuses counter the grave danger of nonuse.

The SAFE KIDS goal in conducting this study was to contribute to the field by offering more data on this special population. We therefore asked our SAFE KIDS coalitions to observe thousands of child passengers in their own communities. In so doing, we could better assess the problem of nonuse – and we could truly witness how often parents are choosing the wrong restraints for their children.

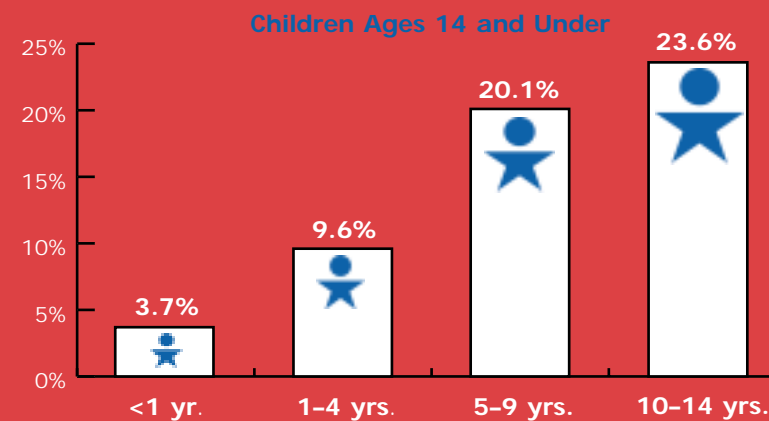
Crash research increasingly confirms that caregivers who fail to protect their children with appropriate restraints are placing them at greater risk. One special concern is that many parents place young children in ill-fitting adult belt systems rather than belt-positioning booster seats. Recent data from the Crash Injury Research & Engineering Network (CIREN) indicate that inappropriately restrained children are nearly three and a half times more likely to suffer a severe injury in a crash than their appropriately restrained peers.<sup>ii</sup> These findings have fueled more booster seat availability, public awareness efforts and booster seat mandates in child occupant protection laws.

Past studies of child restraint use have been limited by small sample sizes, best-guess estimations of ages and weights, and the inherent difficulty of seeing clearly into family vehicles, which are often high off the ground and have tinted windows. The National SAFE KIDS Campaign, utilizing its extensive network of trained child passenger safety technicians from SAFE KIDS coalitions, has therefore conducted the largest-ever interactive, observational survey of restraint use among children in the United States.

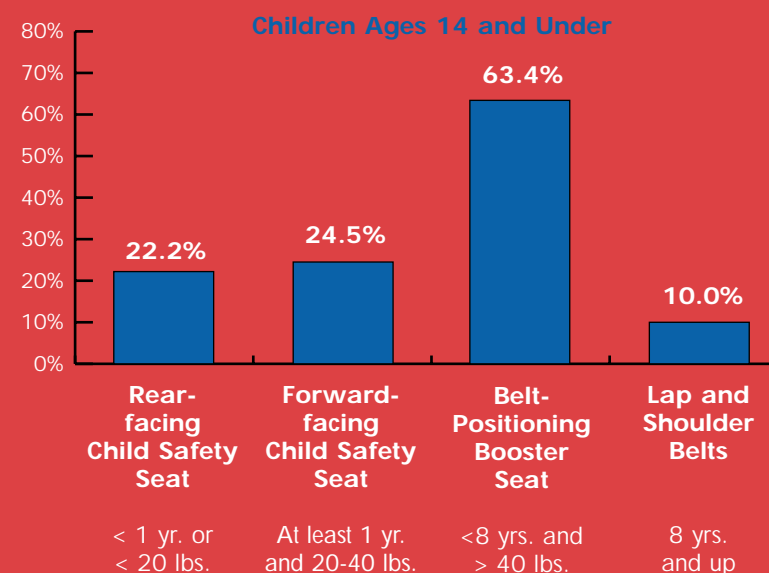
## OVERALL CHILD RESTRAINT USE



## UNRESTRAINED CHILDREN BY AGE GROUP



## INAPPROPRIATELY RESTRAINED CHILDREN BY SEAT CLASS



## METHODOLOGY

The results of this study are based on a sample of 9,332 children ages 14 and under who were observed in 6,297 motor vehicles between November 2001 and January 2002. These data were captured at 174 sites in 48 states and the District of Columbia. Site selection was based on a SAFE KIDS coalition geographic presence and technical expertise in child restraint use. Each SAFE KIDS data collecting team chose the specific venue for its survey, focusing on areas with slowed traffic patterns and a likelihood of child passengers. Common locations included parking lots of fast food restaurants, gas stations, childcare centers and shopping malls. This was therefore a convenience sample rather than a probability survey.

These data represent a combination of direct observation and driver interviews, entailing consent from each vehicle driver to observe in-depth the circumstances of restraint use of all children in the car. Adult drivers were asked to provide key variables including age and weight of the children in the vehicle, and race/ethnicity of both the driver and children. SAFE KIDS data collectors directly observed the type of vehicle, type of child restraint used, child’s seating position in the vehicle and driver restraint use.

Surveys were conducted by trained child passenger safety technicians and data were recorded on standardized forms developed by the National SAFE KIDS Campaign. Data forms were optically scanned and verified using TELEform version 7.0 software. Data were exported to SPSS version 8.0 statistical software for analysis.

## STUDY RESULTS

### Unrestrained Children

Nearly 14 percent (1,295) of children ages 14 and under were found to be riding completely unrestrained.

Older children were more likely to be unrestrained than younger children. More than 20 percent (558) of children ages 5 to 9 and nearly 24 percent (284) of children ages 10 to 14 were riding completely unrestrained.

Drivers who did not wear safety belts were less likely to restrain the children in their vehicle. Nearly 40 percent (923) of children riding with unbelted drivers were completely unrestrained, compared to only 5 percent (355) of children riding with belted drivers.

Minority children were more likely to be unrestrained (23 percent or 597) than their white counterparts (10 percent or 663).

### Inappropriately Restrained Children

Nearly 33 percent (3,042) of children were using the wrong restraints for their size and age.

Older children were more likely to be in the wrong restraint than younger children. More than 63 percent (1,626) of children who should have been in belt-positioning booster seats (typically ages 4 to 8) were inappropriately restrained, most often in adult safety belts.