



HARBORVIEW
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Ignoring State Seat Belt Law Costs
Montanans \$36 million in Health Care Costs

*Unbelted occupants much more likely to sustain an injury in a crash;
health care costs exceed \$36 million each year*

SEATTLE, October 30, 2008—Occupants who choose not to wear a seat belt are much more likely to be injured in a motor vehicle crash, and the health care costs of injury have a significant economic impact on both the state of Montana and its residents, according to a new study conducted by the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center in Seattle. Researchers looked at crash data involving belted and unbelted passengers in Montana from 2004 to 2006.

Among the study's key findings are that an average of 887 unbelted individuals are hospitalized each year for care following a motor vehicle crash. Of these, 819 (92%) sustained a more serious injury because they were not using a seat belt. Researchers found that among the 525 individuals killed on Montana roads during the three-year period, 71% were unrestrained.

The economic impact of injuries sustained by unbelted passengers was substantial. The cost of providing health care to unbelted Montana patients involved in a crash exceeds \$36 million each year—costs that could be prevented through seat belt use. Because many unbelted patients are uninsured or have Medicaid insurance, researchers also noted that the state of Montana pays over \$14 million annually for the hospital care of unbelted patients who sustained an injury. Each year, every driver in Montana pays an extra \$51 in taxes and insurance premiums to pay for the health care costs of injured, unbelted occupants.

On average, an unbelted occupant had a longer hospital stay (2.3 days longer), required more intensive care (2.7 days longer) and also accrued significantly higher hospital charges (\$52,993) relative to belted occupants who were hospitalized (\$36,420).

“Montanans who don’t wear seat belts are much more likely to hurt themselves, but the bill for their injuries are largely paid by others, using up state tax revenue and resulting in higher insurance premiums,” said Dr. Beth Ebel, director of the Harborview Injury Prevention & Research Center. “Given our tough economic times, it is time to consider measures to increase seat belt use, such as primary enforcement seat belt legislation, which would result in significant cost savings and also save lives”.

Most Montanans already use seat belts, but the 20% who do not are at high risk of injury. Sixty percent of Montana residents support a primary enforcement seat belt law, according to an independent telephone survey of 3,103 state residents, conducted as part of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey in 2008.

The study on health care costs for unbuckled motor vehicle occupants was funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The Harborview Injury Prevention & Research Center is one of the nation’s leading institutions dedicated to injury prevention and trauma research. The Center is affiliated with the University of Washington, and Harborview Medical Center, the designated Level 1 trauma center for the states of Washington, Montana, Idaho and Alaska.

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(Editor’s note: For media interested in contacting Dr. Beth Ebel, principal investigator, please call 206-744-9430, or email ktormey@u.washington.edu.)