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MOTORING

Safety First? True Once, but U.S. Now Lags in Road Deaths

By TANYA MOHN

DRIVING has never been safer. Cars, which once had just one air bag, can now have six or more, and there are crumple zones to protect occupants in a crash and electronic stability control to avoid crashes in the first place. There are run-flat tires and antilock brakes. The rate of highway fatalities has plummeted since 1970, when the United States led the world in road safety.

Still, despite its head start and that cocoon of technology, the nation has steadily slipped behind other countries, becoming comparatively one of the most dangerous places to drive in the industrialized world.

The United States ranks 42nd of the 48 countries measured in the number of fatalities per capita, according to the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) and the International Transport Forum. Australia, Britain, France, Germany and Japan all did significantly better.

And in what many safety experts consider a more precise measure, fatalities per distance driven, the United States was No. 1 in 1970 with the lowest death rate among industrialized countries reporting data. It now ranks 11th, with some countries reporting rates that are 25 percent lower.

“Here we are, probably the richest country in the world,” said Barbara L. Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety offices. “Why are other countries doing a better job than we are?”

Safety experts said the reasons were many. One, they said, was inadequate driver training. Some countries require that teenagers have 100 hours behind the wheel before they receive a license, compared to about 6 in the United States.

But expert after expert said the real problem was one of culture. With personal freedom being a cornerstone of the United States, many states are loath to pass legislation that curtails them, even when it comes to road safety. So while the governments of other countries can easily pass laws to make driving safer, like a national ban on hand-held cellphone use, those laws here are left up to the states to impose, and that is often not so easy.

New Hampshire, for example, is the only state with no seat belt law for adults, and in May its state Senate rejected a bill that would have mandated the use of belts.

“The citizens of New Hampshire don’t like to be told by anyone else what to do,” said State Senator Robert E. Clegg Jr.

Fred Wegman, managing director of the National Institute for Road Safety Research in the Netherlands, said attitudes were different in Europe. There, he said, safety is not just about the individual, but is the responsibility of society as a whole. “European countries fundamentally pay more political attention to road safety,” he said.

Allan F. Williams, a road safety consultant who had been the chief scientist at the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#), compared the United States with Australia. "Here there is not a lot of attention or money" paid to road safety, Dr. Williams said. "We don't see it as a national priority."

In Australia, "the government is more willing to intervene to protect the health and safety of the community," he said.

Peter Sweatman, who is Australian and director of the [University of Michigan](#) Transportation Research Institute, said Australians were willing to give up a little freedom in exchange for better safety.

"There is a willingness to have strong and targeted enforcement, therefore a little bit of pain is justified," he said. "It's a business management approach to saving lives. It's a relentless focus. I don't see the same kind of commitment here."

Bella Dinh-Zarr, the North American director of Make Roads Safe, a nonprofit organization based in London, said other countries had stricter laws, better enforcement, more accessible public transportation, greater awareness, public support and more rigorous training and licensing standards.

"We're moving in the right direction, but other countries have moved even further," she said.

Statistics from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a research organization financed by industrialized nations based in Paris, show that while the United States reduced road deaths from 1970 to 2005, the latest year the numbers were available, deaths fell even more in Western Europe. Sweden and Britain each reported about 35 deaths for every billion kilometers driven in 1970, more than the 30 in the United States. But in 2005 both European countries reported about 6 deaths for every billion kilometers, compared with 9 in the United States.

Seat belt laws are one example of the different approaches. About half the states do not allow the police to stop drivers solely for not using them.

"The U.S. is the only country in the world that has a secondary seat belt law," said Dr. Dinh-Zarr of Make Roads Safe.

Training and licensing standards overseas also reflect some major differences.

"The standards of both training and testing are far below acceptable levels in this country," said Eddie Wren, president of Advanced Drivers of America, a company based in Williamsville, N.Y.

"In some states the driver being tested does not even leave the parking lot and averages about eight minutes; in Britain the road test is 40 to 50 minutes, occurs on different types of roads, and has more complex tasks," said Mr. Wren, who was a traffic police officer in England.

But experts agree that education is not the most effective way to reduce traffic injuries among teenagers.

"There is a gap between what we know and what we do," said Dr. Williams, the safety consultant. "Driver education and training do not work by themselves, but have a role when coupled with hands-on, supervised driving time and strong graduated driver licensing laws."

Almost all state programs could benefit from strengthening their requirements, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), because most driver education programs require only about six hours of on-road driving experience.

“Some other countries require 100 hours of behind-the-wheel experience,” said David A. Sleet, associate director for science at the centers’ Division of Unintentional Injury Prevention. He said that most experts agreed that behind-the-wheel training should be a minimum of 30 hours. But one area where the United States continues to excel is in vehicle design.

David Ward, director general of the FIA Foundation for the Automobile and Society, a nonprofit based in London, said the United States had taken the lead in installing electronic stability control, a technology invented in Europe that helps prevent skids. It is considered by some to be the greatest life-saving technology since the seat belt and is expected to reduce single-vehicle crashes of cars by 34 percent and sport utility vehicles by 59 percent, according to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#). It will be mandatory in all passenger cars in the United States by model year 2012.

“The U.S. has been instrumental in establishing a global standard,” Mr. Ward said. “We’re pushing Europe to match what the Americans are doing.”

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