

Seat Belts - Time for Action



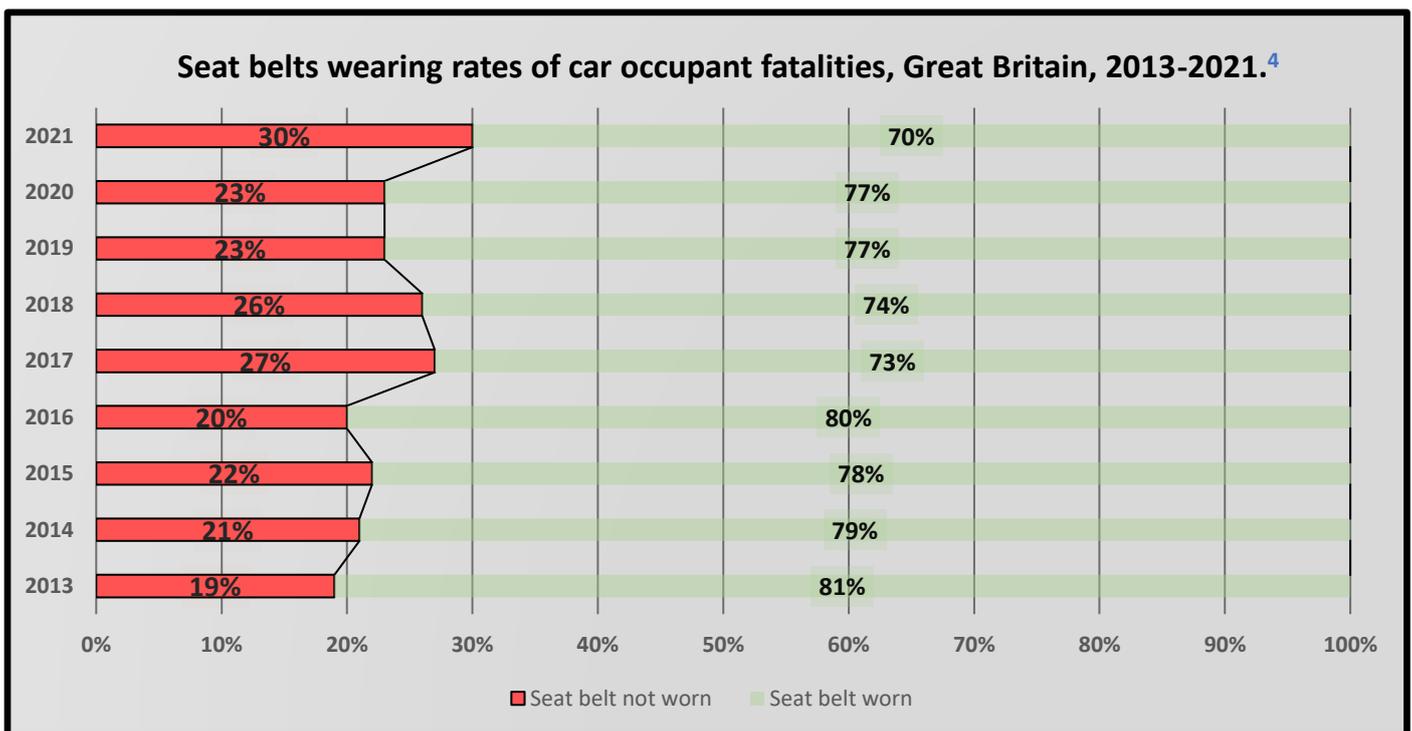
Seat Belts – Time for Action

The seat belt is probably the single most effective road safety measure of all. Wearing a seat belt reduces the risk of death for drivers in a road collision by some 50%.¹ Yet 40 years since it became compulsory to wear them, over 200 people died in car crashes in Great Britain while not wearing a seat belt. This old issue needs new attention. A combination of practical and inexpensive actions by the government could dramatically reduce this number. PACTS sets out here the facts and solutions. Action is overdue.

Seat belt wearing in the front seats of cars became compulsory in the UK in 1983. Wearing rates rose rapidly. By 1991, seat belt wearing was a legal requirement in all seating positions and wearing rates were above 90%. Almost 40 years later, 95% of front seat occupants and 92% of rear seat occupants wear seat belts.² On the surface, it seems “job well done”!³

The founders of PACTS were responsible for the law that made seat belt wearing compulsory in the front seats of cars. More than any other group, PACTS has continued to highlight the importance of seat belt wearing, with detailed [research reports](#) and recommendations to the government.

However, of the 682 people who died in collisions in cars in Great Britain in 2021, an estimated 30% (over 200 people) were not wearing a seat belt – the highest level recorded since recent records began.⁴ (See chart below.)



Even this may be an underestimate. PACTS obtained data from specialist police collision investigation units which showed that the percentage of people dying in cars, when not wearing a seat belt, was even higher than reported in official figures. Based on over 1,000 records, in 2018 the non-wearing rate was 31% compared with the 26% reported by the Department for Transport that year.⁵

¹ [Global status report on road safety 2018 \(who.int\)](#) p 40.

² [Seatbelt wearing rates: Great Britain 2021 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [PACTS, Seat Belts: The Forgotten Road Safety Priority, April 2019 \(pacts.org.uk\)](#). With support from Direct Line.

⁴ DfT, [ras0711.ods \(live.com\), 2022](#): Percentages exclude records where seat belt wearing status is unknown. Such cases account for almost half of car occupant fatality records (48% over the last five years)

⁵ [PACTS, Seat Belts: Time for Action, March 2020 \(pacts.org.uk\)](#) With support from Direct Line.

Seat belts – vital for everyone.

In August 1997, Diana, Princess of Wales was killed when the car in which she was travelling hit a pillar in a Paris underpass. Two other people in the car also died. Only her bodyguard survived. He was the only one to be wearing a seat belt. In September 2022, Cyrus Mistry, Indian businessman and former Chairman of Tata Group died when his car was in a collision on a highway in Mumbai. He was in a rear seat and not wearing a seatbelt. The driver and the front seat passenger survived. They were wearing a seatbelt.

Even in top of the range modern cars seat belts are a critical element of occupant safety.

A combination of technology, enforcement and education is vital to maintain and improve seat belt wearing rates. Failure to wear a seat belt is often accompanied by other risks such as speeding, drink driving, driving at night and other traffic law violations.

Research has shown a marked increase in seat belt wearing for those vehicles fitted with automatic seat belt reminders.⁶ These are now mandated by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe under regulation 16 and by Euro NCAP (an industry led voluntary scheme) for all seating positions in cars.⁷ There may be scope to improve their effectiveness, particularly for rear seat occupants and to detect “cheating”. Sophisticated in-vehicle driver monitoring systems which are now appearing may also have benefits.⁸

Whereas technology has advanced, enforcement and penalties have lagged behind. There has been a substantial reduction in the level of police enforcement. In the period 2011-2018, the number of Fixed Penalty Notices or awareness courses issued for failure to wear a seat belt dropped from 137,000 to 52,000.⁹

The police prioritise enforcement of the “Fatal Four” traffic offences because of the high levels of risk they entail. The four are failure to wear a seat belt, excessive / inappropriate speed, Impairment by alcohol or drugs, and distraction such as mobile phone use. Seat belt wearing has had the least attention. In 2022, the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) confirmed that Fatal Four would be a national road policing priorities and all forces would participate in national campaigns.¹⁰ The annual seatbelt enforcement operations by NPCC show that not wearing a seat belt is still a major road safety challenge.

The penalty for failure to wear a seat belt is inadequate. It is the only one of the Fatal Four that carries no penalty points. In England, Scotland and Wales the current penalty for not wearing a seat belt, if issued a Fixed Penalty Notice, is £100, with a maximum penalty of £500 if taken to court, unchanged since 2012. Offenders may be offered an awareness course costing less.

Will the government act?

“The Department for Transport knows that in 2021, in 30% of all car occupant fatalities recorded, seat belts were not worn. This is unacceptably high, and we have been considering options to tackle this including the potential merits of introducing penalty points. This might form part of the Department for Transport’s planned call for evidence on motoring offences.”

[Transport Minister Katherine Fletcher MP,](#)

in reply to a parliamentary question by PACTS President Barry Sheerman MP, 27 October 2022

⁶ European Commission, [Seat belt reminders \(europa.eu\)](https://european-council.europa.eu/media/en/press-communications/infographic/infographic_seat_belt_reminders_en.pdf), 2022

⁷ Regulation No 16 of the Economic Commission for Europe of the United Nations (UN/ECE) (2022), [E/ECE/324/Rev.1/Add.15/Rev.10 \(unece.org\)](https://www.unece.org/transport/standards/infobox.aspx?id=16), pp 38-40.

⁸ [Euro NCAP Vision 2030: a safer future for mobility](#), p 8.

⁹ [PACTS, Roads policing and its contribution to road safety, 2020 \(pacts.org.uk\)](https://www.pacts.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PACTS-Roads-policing-and-its-contribution-to-road-safety-2020.pdf), pp 70-72.

¹⁰ [NPCC, National Roads Policing Strategy for 2022-2025, April 2022.](https://www.npcc.police.uk/media/1234567/npcc-national-roads-policing-strategy-for-2022-2025-april-2022.pdf)

In Northern Ireland, however, since 2007 drivers can receive points for not wearing a seat belt or carrying an unbelted passenger under the age of fourteen. Data suggest that Northern Ireland has the best record of any UK nation on seat belt usage – 98% of the front seat occupants and 94% of the rear seat passengers.¹¹ Over the period 2016-2021, around 20% of car occupant fatalities in Northern Ireland were not wearing a seatbelt and 0.4% of all car occupant casualties who were wearing a seatbelt sustained fatal injuries, compared with 4.2% who were not wearing a seat belt.¹²

New cameras that detect seat belt and mobile phone offences are being trialled by National Highways and Vision Zero South West. Multiple cameras are housed in a vehicle equipped to record video footage of passing motorists. Using artificial intelligence, alongside confirmatory human analysis, these can ascertain whether drivers are using a handheld mobile phone or failing to wear a seatbelt. The trials are proving successful. Substantial numbers of offences have been detected – many more seat belt offences than mobile phone violations.

PACTS calls for the following action

Penalties and enforcement

- Not wearing a seat belt should be made an endorsable offence, with at least three penalty points for an offence.
- Enforcement of the seat belt law should be significantly enhanced through intelligence-led, targeted measures. The profile of enforcement and the perceived likelihood of being caught should be raised through linked communications.
- Camera technology, incorporating AI, has great enforcement potential. It should be used much more widely.

Education

- Existing road safety education activities should be reviewed to see if seat belt wearing is given due prominence.
- Driving instructors should be advised on how best to convey the importance to learners.

Vehicle safety technology

- Government regulations and voluntary standards should continue to encourage manufacturers to develop additional, more effective systems that could encourage seat belt wearing and improve the effectiveness of seat belts.

Data

- Where a police forensic collision investigation has been undertaken, the investigators should review the seat belt wearing status in the Stats19 data.

¹¹ [Northern Ireland Survey of Seat Belt Wearing 2014 \(infrastructure-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk) p 10.

¹² [Northern Ireland Road Safety Strategy report](#), p 38.



With support from



Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS)
Buckingham Court
78 Buckingham Gate
Westminster
London, UK
SW1E 6PE

admin@pacts.org.uk
02072227732
www.pacts.org.uk
@PACTS