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(http://i2.wp.com/www.thewisedrive.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Female_driver_buckling_seatbelt.jpg)

Why are seat belts mandatory when it affects only the person who chooses not to wear it? I've heard of people who survived crashes by being thrown from the car while the passenger using the seat belt died. Or people who drown because they crash into water and can't get their seat belt off. I think I should be able to make my own personal safety decisions.

Where do I start? Let's take a look at the numbers. Last year 567 people were killed in traffic crashes (<http://wtsc.wa.gov/research-data/quarterly-target-zero-data/>) in Washington. Of those who died, 113 were not using a seat belt.

Right now some of you who just read that are thinking, "If 80 percent of the people who died in car crashes were wearing seat belts, doesn't that mean not wearing a seat belt is five times safer than wearing one?" Nope, and here's why: About 95 percent of all drivers in Washington wear a seat belt (<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812030.pdf>), leaving 5 percent as non-users. Those non-users make up 20 percent of traffic fatalities.

If my math is correct, your odds of dying in a car crash are four times greater if you don't wear a seat belt.

I think that makes the point, but I'll drive it home by considering the "thrown from the car" scenario. Drivers who are thrown from their vehicle aren't magically transported from the vehicle cabin to a soft tuft of grass overlooking the crash site. From point of impact to final resting place, the driver will probably hit the steering wheel, the dashboard, the windshield, external parts of the car, pavement and gravel. There probably won't be a soft tuft of grass at the end, since that's not a common element of road design or construction. That's a lot of things to hit that the buckled driver won't encounter.


According to crash data, getting thrown from a vehicle is a lousy option, with a fatality rate of 79 percent (<http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/812153.pdf>). Let's agree that wearing a seat belt is generally the safest choice.

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
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But what about specific scenarios, like a vehicle that ends up submerged? Despite the urban legends to the contrary, seat belt use still increases your likelihood of survival. According to a study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (<http://www-esv.nhtsa.dot.gov/Proceedings/22/files/22ESV-000170.pdf>), just over half of all people killed in crashes involving vehicle submersion were not wearing a seat belt. (Remember, they only make up 5 percent of the drivers.)

Supposedly, seat belts trap occupants in submerged cars, causing drowning. The reality though, is that most cars that end up under water started as single vehicle roll-over crashes. Seat belts are critical to surviving a roll-over crash and increase the probability that the occupant is still conscious and able to physically escape the submerged vehicle. Again, seat belts with the win, this time at 10-to-1 odds.

One more bit of data, just to be clear on the benefit of seat belts. Back in the '90s, when some states were beginning to establish primary seat belt laws, the states with those laws had compliance rates 12 points higher than states with secondary seat belt laws. That increase in compliance coincided with a 21 percent decrease in traffic fatalities (<http://www.nhtsa.gov/About+NHTSA/Traffic+Techs/current/Primary+Enforcement+of+Seat+Bel+t+Use+Laws+Saves+Lives+and+Reduces+Injuries>) for those states.

But what about the argument that it only affects the people who choose not to wear it? This is just a myth perpetuated by people who can't see beyond themselves. Injuries and fatalities that could have been prevented through seat belt use impact the first responders, the hospital staff, the friends and family of the victim, and every citizen that contributes tax dollars to fund medical services. I suppose someone could create a system where we leave seat belt use to individual choice and only provide emergency medical services to people who never break a safety rule, but that sounds more like the subplot of a dystopian sci-fi than a community I'd want to live in.

Finally, one more incentive to wearing your seat belt: May 23 starts the two-week national Click It or Ticket campaign aimed at encouraging everyone to wear their seat belt on every trip. Officers in Washington will be focusing on compliance. Save yourself \$136; buckle up and drive wise.

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