To the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 
the National Sheriffs’ Association, 
and members of the State Association of Chiefs of Police 
(see attached mailing list)

In severe frontal crashes, air bags clearly increase the chances of survival, particularly for unbelted adult drivers. The protection afforded by air bags, however, does not extend equally to all passenger vehicle occupants. Between 1993 and 1996, 38 children died because they were struck by an air bag in what would have otherwise been a survivable crash, and 23 adults were also killed by their air bags in crashes they should have survived. The increasing public concern about air bags and urgent questions regarding the effectiveness and the potential danger of these life-saving devices prompted the National Transportation Safety Board to convene a 4-day public forum in March 1997 to discuss concerns related to the role of air bags, to identify who is vulnerable to injuries, to examine the experience with air bags in other countries, and to address ways to increase seatbelt and child restraint use.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) participated in the forum, along with representatives from Australia, Canada and Europe, the automobile industry, air bag suppliers, insurance, safety, and consumer groups, and family members involved in crashes where air bags deployed.

Several points became evident during the forum. The “one-size-fits-all” approach to air bag design is obsolete: air bags need to be designed to protect all people in a variety of crash situations. With regard to passenger vehicles on the road today, children need to be in the back seat, and everyone needs to be buckled up and seated as far back as possible from the air bag. NHTSA needs to move quickly on a decision regarding air bag deactivation. NHTSA’s databases of crash information preclude a proper evaluation of the effectiveness of air bags because the information is not comprehensive in one database and is insufficient in the other. Finally and perhaps most importantly, societal attitudes must change with regard to seatbelt use. The United States remains far behind other countries in seatbelt use, and the Nation pays a high price for it in terms of lives lost. Elected officials need to take responsibility for tough enforcement programs and to consider financial incentives (or penalties) if the Nation is to increase seatbelt use.

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The Safety Board's concerns about motor vehicle occupant protection have led it to examine and recommend action on a wide range of safety issues throughout its 30-year history. Important changes have already occurred, including improved designs of seatbelts and child restraint systems, the required installation of lap/shoulder belts at all outboard seating positions, the mandated use of child restraint systems in all 50 States and seatbelts in 49 States, an increase in public education about the importance of restraint use, and increased child restraint and seatbelt use rates. Additional improvements, however, are still needed.

About 40 percent of the children who are younger than 5 years and involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained, almost half of all children 5 to 9 years old and involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained, and about 40 percent of all front seat occupants involved in fatal crashes are unrestrained. Not only are these occupants at risk of being seriously injured or killed in a crash, but they are also, for the most part, violating the traffic laws.

According to NHTSA, lap/shoulder belts, when used properly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat passenger vehicle occupants by 45 percent. Proper use of child restraint systems have been shown by NHTSA to be 71 percent effective in reducing the risk of death to infants in passenger vehicles and 54 percent effective for children between the ages of 1 and 4.

Increasing the child restraint and seatbelt use rate is the most effective way of cutting the highway death toll. The Safety Board has previously recommended that the States enact strong legislation regarding child restraint and seatbelt use. In 1991, the Safety Board recommended that the 12 States without mandatory restraint use laws (MULs) enact legislation that would require occupants of all passenger cars, vans, and light trucks to use lap/shoulder belt systems in seating positions equipped with such belt systems. In 1995, the Board recommended that the States enact legislation that provides for primary enforcement of mandatory seatbelt use laws. Primary enforcement allows law enforcement officials to stop a vehicle solely for a seatbelt violation. Because of the importance of this issue, the Board placed this recommendation on its “Most Wanted” list of safety improvements. Today 49 States, the U.S. Territories, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have MULs.

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3 Data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) maintained by the U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration


5 The purpose of the “Most Wanted” list, which is drawn up from safety recommendations previously issued, is to bring special emphasis to safety issues the Board deems most critical.

6 New Hampshire does not mandate seat use beyond age 12.
In general, seatbelt use rates in 1996 averaged about 15 percent higher in States with primary enforcement laws than in States with secondary enforcement laws. A 1987 evaluation by the University of North Carolina found that belt use increased as a function of enforcement level (i.e., citation rates per 100,000 population). For each enforcement level, belt use was 10 to 13 percent higher in States with primary enforcement laws than in States with secondary enforcement laws.

According to NHTSA, increasing the seatbelt use rate from the present 68 percent to 85 percent would prevent an estimated 4,194 fatalities and 103,518 injuries annually. This reduction in injuries and deaths would result in an economic savings of about $6.7 billion annually. A 90-percent use rate would prevent 5,536 fatalities and 132,670 injuries and would save $8.8 billion annually. Seatbelts and child restraints are the most effective means of reducing fatalities and serious injuries when traffic crashes occur; they are estimated to save 9,500 lives in the United States each year.

North Carolina has demonstrated that a primary enforcement seatbelt law in combination with a dedicated and visible seatbelt traffic enforcement program increases restraint use and saves lives; the State reported a reduction of 100 fatalities in the first year following its “Click It or Ticket” occupant restraint enforcement campaign. The Safety Board is aware of several other seatbelt enforcement programs in addition to the one in North Carolina.

Seatbelt enforcement programs, however, may not be a priority for many law enforcement organizations that are responsible for traffic safety. An active seatbelt enforcement program combined with a primary seatbelt law has more potential for reducing highway deaths and injuries than most other traffic enforcement programs. Additionally, active seatbelt enforcement programs have shown an excellent opportunity to identify other violators, such as fugitives. Furthermore, the Safety Board recognizes the impact law enforcement officers have in encouraging States and legislators to enact certain laws. The Board believes that if the law enforcement community actively supported passage of primary seatbelt laws, States would be more likely to enact the laws needed to reduce highway deaths and injuries.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the members of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the State Association of Chiefs of Police, and the National Sheriffs’ Association:

Actively support efforts to adopt primary enforcement of seatbelt laws in States that do not have such legislation (H-97-8)

Conduct dedicated and highly visible occupant restraint enforcement programs that focus on increasing the use of seatbelts and child restraints (H-97-9)

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The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "...to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendations in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendations H-97-8 and -9 in your reply.

Chairman HALL, Vice Chairman FRANCIS, and Members HAMMERSCHMIDT, GOGLIA, and BLACK concurred in these recommendations.

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