

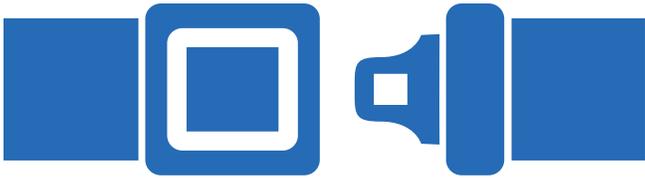


# Seat Belt Use in North Dakota:

**The Problem, The Cost  
and A Solution to Unbelted  
Motor Vehicle Crashes**

**VISION ZERO**   
Zero fatalities. Zero excuses.

Prepared by North Dakota Department  
of Transportation and Vision Zero Partners



## The Problem of Unbelted Motor Vehicle Crashes in North Dakota

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of injury-related death in North Dakota.<sup>1</sup>

The number one contributing factor in these motor vehicle deaths is not wearing a seat belt.

**NEARLY**  
**1/2** Motor Vehicle Fatalities were **UNBELTED** (ND 2019)

### Seat belts save lives.

Seat belts are the single most effective safety device to prevent death and injury in a motor vehicle crash. Seat belts:<sup>2</sup>

- Prevent collision with other occupants of the vehicle
- Keep people in the vehicle
- Spread the force of impact over a large area and the strongest part of the body
- Allow a person's body to slow down gradually, lessening the impact on internal organs
- Prevent impact with the interior of the vehicle
- Prevent trauma to the brain and spinal cord caused by sudden change in motion

**Yet, many North Dakotans choose not to use their seat belts.**

According to a statewide survey of observed seat belt use, most motorists in North Dakota wear their seat belts. An annual survey of observed seat belt use in North Dakota in 2019 shows that 8 out of every 10 people wear a seat belt (83.7%). But it is those who do not wear seat belts who are much more likely to lose their life in a crash. Approximately 20% – about 150,000 people – are still not buckling up.<sup>3</sup>

### Key statistics for unbelted motor vehicle fatalities.<sup>4</sup>

There are more than 14,000 vehicle crashes in North Dakota each year resulting in fatalities, injuries, and property damage.

#### One-year snapshot (2019)

**EVERY**  
**11 DAYS**  
one unbelted vehicle occupant died (ND 2019)

**EVERY**  
**5 DAYS**  
one unbelted vehicle occupant was ejected (ND 2019)

- 46% of the 100 motor vehicle fatalities in North Dakota were not wearing their seat belt (excludes those where seat belts do not apply including pedestrians, bicycles, motorcycles, and off-highway vehicles).
- 53% of unbelted fatalities were partially or totally ejected.
- 77% of single vehicle rollover fatalities were not wearing their seat belt.
- 81% of those unbelted rollover fatalities were either partially or totally ejected.

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<sup>2</sup> National Safety Council

<sup>3</sup> North Dakota State University Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute and the North Dakota Department of Transportation [NDDOT], Safety Division

<sup>4</sup> NDDOT Safety Division

### Five-year snapshot (2015-2019)

- In North Dakota over the past 5 years, more than half (55%) of the people killed in a motor vehicle crash, where seat belts applied, were unbelted/not restrained at the time of the crash. Approximately, 3 of 10 people killed in crashes where seat belts applied were belted. The remainder were unknown at the time of the crash.
- 80% of the unbelted fatalities were males.

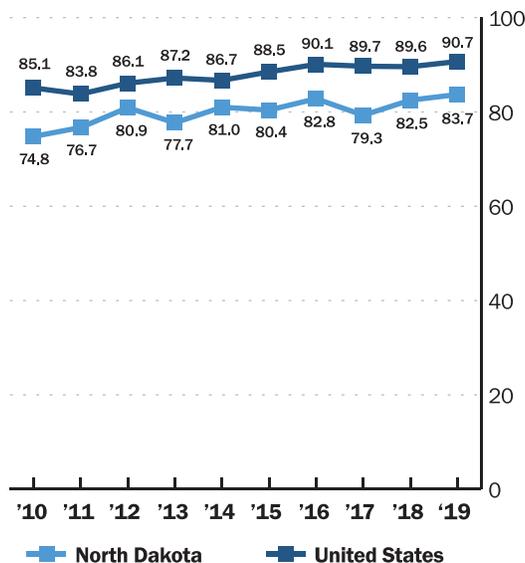
**North Dakota Unbelted Motor Vehicle Fatalities, 2015-2019**

Year	Fatalities*	No Seat Belt Used	Percent Unbelted
2015	111	68	61%
2016	87	51	59%
2017	91	50	58%
2018	77	37	48%
2019	74	34	46%

\*Includes fatalities where seat belts were available within the vehicle. Excludes fatalities where seat belts do not apply (pedestrians, bicycles, motorcycles, off-highway vehicles, persons riding on the exterior of motor vehicles, bus passengers, and farm/construction equipment).

North Dakota’s observed seat belt use rate has been consistently lower than the national seat belt use rate over the past 10 years (2010-2019).<sup>5</sup>

**North Dakota vs. United States Seat Belt Use Rate, 2010-2019<sup>5</sup>**



## The Cost

### Seat belt use is not just a personal choice.

While some individuals consider seat belt use to be a personal choice, it is a choice that affects nearly everyone – including North Dakota taxpayers.

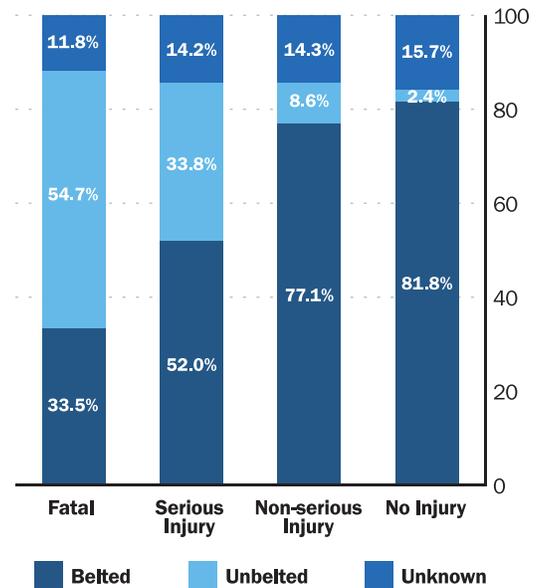
### Unbelted motor vehicle crashes have a high cost to North Dakota.

Motor vehicle crash deaths and injuries resonate beyond the victim and their families. There is also cost to each North Dakota taxpayer in terms of emergency response, medical assistance, increased insurance premiums, unemployment compensation, and more.

### Seat belt use and injury severity: Direct correlation.

Unbelted vehicle occupants in crashes in North Dakota account for the largest percent of fatalities and serious injuries, while belted occupants most commonly receive non-serious or no injuries.

**North Dakota Percent of Restraint Use by Injury Classification, 2015-2019<sup>6</sup>**



<sup>5</sup> NDDOT Safety Division and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA]

<sup>6</sup> NDDOT Safety Division

## Unbelted crash victims have 50% higher medical bills.

Research has shown that unbelted crash victims have medical bills 50% higher than belted crash victims.<sup>7</sup>

## \$28 million in costs to North Dakota Workforce Safety and Insurance

Costs to North Dakota Workforce Safety and Insurance (WSI) – and therefore, North Dakota employers – can be significantly reduced with consistent seat belt use.

In a November 2018 analysis, costs to North Dakota WSI for employees injured in unbelted motor vehicle crashes were more than \$12.3 million over the most recent five-year period of 2013-2017.\*

This amount increases to more than \$28 million in costs to WSI when indemnity and medical reserves (anticipated spending through the life of the claims) are added.

\*Conservative estimates based on WSI claims data matched with NDDOT crash data. Not all records were matched between NDDOT and WSI data, and amounts reported here do not represent costs that were incurred but not yet reported. Actual costs to WSI are likely higher.

## A Solution

*“If North Dakota had a primary seat belt law, more people would wear seat belts and there wouldn’t be so many families living the nightmare of having to bury their loved ones.”*

Quote from Corey Nelson, brother of Kyle Nelson. Kyle was killed in a single-vehicle rollover in rural Geneseo, ND on November 13, 2014. He was not wearing a seat belt, was ejected from, and pinned under the vehicle.

### A primary seat belt law.

North Dakota has a secondary seat belt law that allows law enforcement officers to issue a citation for lack of seat belt use only when there is another citable traffic infraction. A primary seat belt law (PBL) would allow law enforcement officers to cite a driver or passenger for not wearing a seat belt, without any other traffic offense taking place.

North Dakota is one of just 15 states with a secondary enforcement law.

A PBL is proven to work. States that transitioned to a PBL have experienced a 10-12% increase in their observed seat belt use.<sup>7</sup>

A majority of North Dakotans favor seat belts. North Dakota’s observed seat belt use rate in 2019 was 83.7% (for front seat vehicle occupants).<sup>8</sup>

A majority of North Dakotans favor a PBL. Another 2019 statewide survey showed that 58% of respondents favored a PBL in North Dakota.<sup>8</sup>

### Individual responsibility.

Changing from a secondary to a primary seat belt law makes it clear to all drivers and passengers that they are responsible to the people of North Dakota for using their seat belts.

### Precedent for primary law.

An argument is often made that it is an individual’s right not to wear a seat belt – or even that driving is a right. But, driving is a privilege, not a right. Individuals not meeting requirements set by state law are not allowed to drive a motor vehicle in North Dakota.

Existing requirements include:

- Drivers must be licensed.
- Drivers must obey speed limits and traffic laws.
- Drivers must wear corrective lenses if necessary.
- Drivers may not use text messaging.
- Drivers may not drive while impaired by alcohol or drugs.

And, seat belt use is also among the requirements for the privilege to drive. But, law enforcement cannot primarily enforce this law resulting in non-compliance among some drivers and occupants.

## VISION ZERO

Zero fatalities. Zero excuses.

North Dakota’s Vision Zero strategy aims to establish a culture of personal responsibility where motor vehicle fatalities and serious injuries are recognized as preventable and not tolerated. This means addressing both the causes of crashes and the extent of human injuries and fatalities when crashes occur.

VisionZero.ND.gov