



Despite Traffic Fatalities, Some Police Don't Wear Seat Belts On Duty

Written On March 22, 2010 By [Bob Kraft](#)

The fact that many police officers don't wear seat belts on duty came as a surprise to me. You would think that the police, more than anyone except possibly emergency medical technicians, would realize the hazards of driving unbelted. The [Houston Chronicle](#) recently ran a long investigative story about this subject. Please read the article. Here are the opening paragraphs:

There's an open secret about seat belts at police departments. Many officers killed in line-of-duty car crashes aren't wearing them.

Dozens of officers across the country have died in crashes while not wearing seat belts in recent years — at least 64 between 2004 and 2008 alone, according to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data analyzed for the Houston Chronicle. About 40 percent of officers killed in wrecks during that time period weren't buckled up, the analysis showed.

In Texas, the numbers are similarly stark. Five of the 13 officers killed statewide since 2007 in car crashes while on duty have been unbuckled, the Chronicle found after reviewing Texas Department of Transportation crash reports. The most recent unbuckled officer traffic fatality in Texas was in Burnet County last October. Frank Cantu, killed in a 2004 wreck while unbuckled, was the last member of the Houston Police Department to die in a crash.

It's impossible to know how many of those officers could have been saved if they had buckled up, although one study says officers were nearly three times more likely to die in car crashes with their belts off.

But officers and administrators say police culture can sometimes discourage their use. Some officers worry that their belts could hinder them if they have to exit quickly to confront a suspect — a seat belt can easily get tangled on a holster. Others fret they'll be unable to control violent prisoners while buckled up.

Tough to spot trends

Police-related Internet forums offer tricks for disabling seat belt alarms and for avoiding supervisors who monitor belt usage by officers on patrol.

“The average police officer thinks most cops get killed by felons, and that’s not true. Cops are getting killed in traffic accidents,” said Richard Ashton, who studies traffic safety for the International Association of Chiefs of Police. “Officers don’t think it can happen to them.”

During the past three years, 16 Texas police officers were shot to death, but 18 died in car and motorcycle crashes.

Little research has been done on seat belt use by police officers, making it tough to spot trends or determine how widespread problems are. The limited data comes from sources ranging from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, to an informal study based on the television show *COPS*, to statistics kept by police departments.

How many officers wear seat belts consistently? A 2006 study in the *Journal of Trauma: Injury, Infection and Critical Care* analyzed the syndicated *COPS* series and found officers buckling up less than 40 percent of the time. A 2005 study in the *Journal of Trauma* found about 20 percent of officers who died in crashes between 1997 and 2001 weren’t wearing seat belts. Ashton’s estimate is that up to a third of officers fail to buckle up.

“The problem is widespread,” the former chief of police said.

Some states have exemptions that allow police officers to remove their belts in emergency circumstances. But in Texas, where police are supposed to follow the same seat belt laws as the public, officers say the decision to buckle up isn’t as simple as it might appear.