

**The Introduction of Demerit Points to Increase Compliance with
Seat Belt and Child Safety Seat Legislation in Alberta:**

**An Alberta Occupant Restraint Program (AORP)
Position Paper**

**Adopted by:
The Alberta Occupant Restraint Program
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Executive Summary

Alberta has enjoyed economic growth and diversity, which has resulted in citizens enjoying freedom to travel and move around the province for work, pleasure and recreation. Albertans are keenly dependent upon automobiles on a daily basis; they have become an integral part of our lifestyle. The consequence of living within a society of automobile-dependent individuals is increased risk and exposure to motor vehicle crashes. In an average year over 350 people are killed and over 20,000 injured in motor vehicle collisions. To put this in perspective, traffic crashes take six times more lives than homicides, eight times more lives than AIDS, and one-hundred times more lives than meningitis. Various methodologies have been used to estimate the costs associated with motor vehicle collisions and have resulted in a wide range of estimates. At this time in Alberta, no single costing model or estimate has been widely adopted. Costs range from \$4.68 billion¹ to \$400 million². While discussions continue on costing models, we are reminded that the emotional costs of motor vehicle collisions to families and loved ones are incalculable.

National and international strategic plans for road safety have consistently identified that to significantly reduce traffic injuries, strategies which focus on seat belts, child safety seats, impaired driving, intersection safety, and reducing unsafe speeds are necessary. One of the goals of Vision 2010, Canada's national road safety strategy which has been adopted by all provinces, is to achieve and maintain 95% seat belt compliance by all vehicle occupants by 2010. Two sub-targets call for a 40% decrease in the number of fatally or seriously injured unbelted occupants and a 40% decrease in the number of road users fatally or seriously injured on rural roadways. These goals are closely linked as evidence shows that increasing seat belt wear rates decreases injuries and fatalities.

In Alberta, the partners in the Alberta Occupant Restraint Program (AORP) have worked towards the goals of Vision 2010 for a number of years. Significant progress has been made, with rural seat belt rates increasing 18% from 69% in 1999 to 87% in 2004 with urban rates remaining fairly consistent at 87%. While most Albertans are buckling up, 13% of drivers in both rural and urban areas are at increased risk and continue to disregard the law by not wearing a seat belt. This small percentage of the population is responsible for a significant financial burden to Albertans and our health care system.

Collision data shows that unbelted drivers are more likely to be injured, more expensive to treat and more likely to crash than people who buckle up. In a study conducted in Beaumont, Alberta (2001) of participants who were non-compliant drivers, they indicated that demerits, not increased fines, would be necessary to change their behaviour in relation to buckling up.

Position

The introduction of demerit points for seat belt infractions is the next step to strengthen Alberta's commitment to preventing traffic deaths and injuries. The Alberta Occupant Restraint Program asserts that demerits, in addition to the current fine for seat belt offences, are necessary to achieve and maintain Vision 2010's key goal of a 95% seat belt wear rate by all vehicle occupants in Alberta. This position is consistent with the National Occupant Restraint Program.

By adding demerits to the existing seat belt penalty, Alberta will see a decrease in the number of deaths and injuries in motor vehicle collisions. Health care costs for treating these injuries will decrease. Alberta enjoys economic growth and diversity. Our citizens will continue to enjoy increased mobility as a result of our diverse, growing and healthy economy. We need to take the step of introducing demerits to ensure that all Albertans are buckled up and safe on our roadways.

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Introduction:

In an average day in Alberta, at least one person will die and eighty people will be injured in motor vehicle collisions (MVCs). Road safety is an important issue in Alberta, across Canada and around the world. Among Albertans, motor-vehicle related injury continues to be a leading cause of unintentional injury death. Between 1987 and 1997, motor vehicle related injuries have been the leading cause of injury death for Albertans under the age of 25.³ Various methodologies have been used to estimate the costs associated with motor vehicle collisions and have resulted in a wide range of estimates. At this time in Alberta, no single costing model or estimate has been widely adopted. Costs range from \$4.68 billion⁴ to \$400 million⁵. The burden of these costs to the health care system is both significant and unacceptable. Beyond the enormous financial costs, the social and emotional impacts of these collisions on individuals, families and the community are incalculable.

While 90% of Canadians regularly buckle-up, almost 40% of those killed and 20% of those seriously injured in MVCs did not wear seat belts.⁶ Alberta collision data shows that unbelted occupants are three and a half times more likely to be injured than people who buckled up.⁷ In-patient health care costs for unrestrained drivers and passengers following a crash are fifty percent greater than individuals who buckle-up.⁸ Not only are people who do not wear seat belts more likely to be injured and more expensive to treat, a study published in 2005 reports that unbelted drivers were ten times more likely to crash compared to drivers who were wearing their seat belts, even after adjustment for other variables.⁹

Seat belts and child restraint systems are the most cost effective method of reducing deaths and injuries in motor vehicle collisions.¹⁰ National and international strategic plans for road safety consistently identify seat belts and child safety seats as key strategies to reduce traffic injuries.^{2, 11} Transport Canada has estimated that if the seat belt usage rate in *rural* Alberta climbs steadily to a rate of 92.5% by 2009, at least 510 lives would be saved on rural Alberta roads resulting in an economic savings of over \$765 million. This amount would be supplemented by significant savings from reductions in fatal crashes in *urban* areas, as well as substantial savings in health care, rehabilitation and related costs for individuals injured and disabled in MVCs.

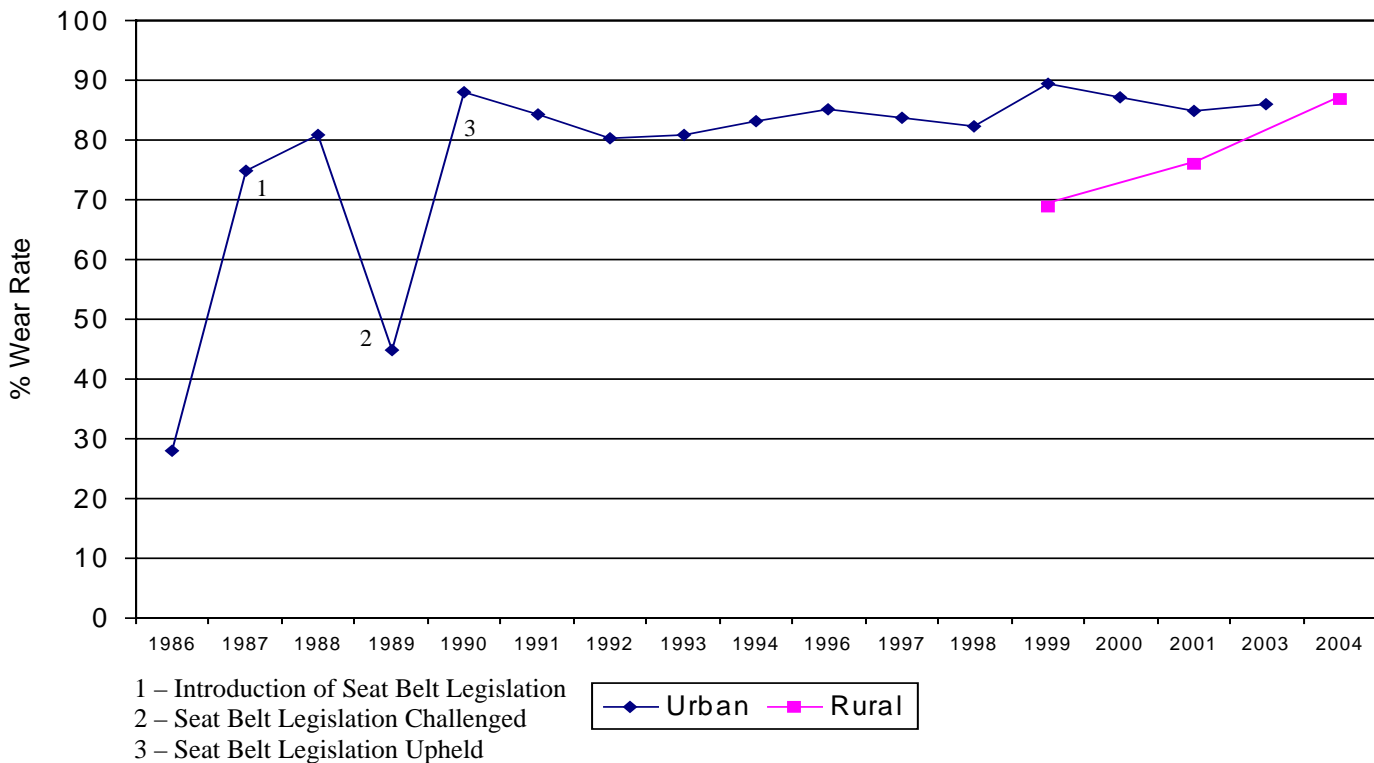
To address the unacceptable costs of MVCs, Road Safety Vision 2010, Canada's national road safety strategy, has set a goal of achieving and maintaining a 95% seat belt wear rate by 2010. Two additional Vision 2010 targets are a 40% decrease in the number of fatally or seriously injured unbelted occupants and a 40% decrease in the number of road users fatally or seriously injured on rural roadways.⁴ These goals are closely linked as evidence shows that increasing seat belt wear rates decreases injuries and fatalities.

The Alberta Experience – Seat Belt Legislation and Use

In 1985, the Government of Alberta introduced child safety seat legislation followed by seat belt legislation in 1987. In 1988, the law was challenged and during that year seat belt wear rates dropped to 45%.¹² In 1989, the law was upheld and seat belt wear rates rose immediately to 88%. This change in seat belt wear rates demonstrates the effectiveness of legislation as a strategy to change drivers' behaviour. This is consistent with injury prevention research. Laws and regulations have been described as among the most effective mechanisms in traffic injury prevention. Legislative efforts to reduce road deaths have been one of the key twentieth century achievements in public health in North America.¹³

The Alberta Occupant Restraint Program (AORP) and its partners have been working towards increasing the correct use of seat belts and child restraints since 1996. In 1999, an Alberta study found that rural seat belt wear rates were 69%, 20% lower than urban wear rates. In response to these findings, AORP developed a strategic plan utilizing education and enforcement to target rural communities. This plan was implemented by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Regional Health Authorities across the province. As a result of these targeted education and enforcement activities, surveys conducted in 2001 and 2004 have shown that rural seat belt wear rates have steadily increased from 69% to 87%. Urban seat belt wear rates have remained fairly consistent at 87%. While most Albertans are buckling up, 13% of drivers in both rural and urban areas are at increased risk and continue to disregard the law by not wearing a seat belt. This small percentage of the population is responsible for a significant financial burden to Albertans and our health care system.

Figure 1 – Changes in Seat Belt Wear Rates in Alberta, 1986 – 2004^{14,15}



The Effectiveness of Demerits

There is evidence that once a seat belt wear rate of 85% has been achieved, stronger strategies other than awareness and education are required to reach the motorists who continue to drive without wearing a seat belt. The application of demerit points as an effective strategy for improving seat belt wear rates has been well documented.¹⁶ The demerit point system has been used successfully in Alberta to reinforce the seriousness of traffic offences such as running red lights, failing to stop at a stop sign, passing a school bus while loading, careless driving and excessive speeding.

The fatality and injury data from across Canada shows that the provinces that had the lowest fatality and injury rates from motor vehicle collisions in 2002 also had demerit points in place for seat belt violations. It is anticipated that the introduction of demerit points in Alberta would have an almost immediate effect on seat belt wear rates, fatality and injury rates.

Table 1: Comparison of Fatality & Injury Rates to Seat Belt Fines & Points¹⁷

Province/Territory	April 2000		Fatality Rate per 100,000 (2002)	Injury Rate per 100,000 (2002)
	Points	Fine		
Newfoundland & Labrador	2	45	7.1	502.3
North West Territories	2	50	7.2	555.5
Ontario	2	110	7.3	696.3
Nova Scotia	2	78.75	9.3	629.7
Quebec	2	80	9.4	716.1
Manitoba	0	74	9.5	828.3
Nunavut	n/a	n/a	10.4	n/a
British Columbia	0	86	11.3	708.6
Alberta	0	57	11.9	931.0
Saskatchewan	2*	75	13.5	719.2
Prince Edward Island	0	110	13.6	749.0
New Brunswick	1	84	13.7	666.0
Yukon	0	40	40.1	n/a

* Points are given for new drivers only (first 2 years of driving)

The Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators (CCMTA) has recommended each jurisdiction target the high risk driver by increasing the monetary cost of an infraction. They also recommend that each province or territory introduce or increase the number of demerits points for non-use of seat belt and child safety seats. The National Occupant Restraint Program (NORP) asserts that the imposition of demerit points, in conjunction with increased enforcement and education, and the removal of seat belt exemptions, will significantly increase seat belt usage rates.¹⁴

Alberta has made significant progress towards achieving a 95% seat belt wear rate. The fine for non-use of seat belts and child safety seats in Alberta increased in May of 2003 to \$115. After the fine increased, there was an increase in the seat belt wear rates to 87%. Across Canada, jurisdictions that have been able to exceed 87% seat belt use have achieved it through the introduction of demerit points. Table 2 illustrates the progress that has occurred in fines and demerits across the country. Alberta remains one of only two provinces that do not have demerits in place for seat belt offences.

Table 2 – Comparison of Points and Fines by Province, 2000 – 2005¹⁴

Province/Territory		April 2000	May 2003	April 2004	April 2005
Newfoundland & Labrador	Points	2	2	2	2
	Fine	45	45	100	100
North West Territories	Points	2	2	2	2
	Fine	50	100	100	100
Ontario	Points	2	2	2	2
	Fine	110	110	110	110
Nova Scotia	Points	2	2	2	2
	Fine	78.75	128.75	128.75	128.75
Quebec	Points	2	3	3	3
	Fine	80	80	80	80
Manitoba	Points	0	0	2	2
	Fine	74	100	230	230
Nunavut	Points	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
	Fine	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Saskatchewan	Points	2**	3**	3**	3**
	Fine	75	105	105	115
Prince Edward Island	Points	0	0	0	3
	Fine	110	110	110	110
New Brunswick	Points	1	1	1	1
	Fine	84	84	84	168
Yukon	Points	0	4	4	4
	Fine	40	75	75	75
Alberta	Points	0	0	0	0
	Fine	57	115	115	115
British Columbia	Points	0	0	0	0
	Fine	86	86	109*	109*

* Reduced by \$25 if paid within 30 days

** Points are given for new drivers only (first 2 years of driving)

Achieving 95% Seat Belt Wear Rate – Demerits for the High Risk Driver

Males between the ages of 21- 45 are more at risk of injury in motor vehicle collisions involving non-use of seat belts, impaired driving, and failing to stop at stop signs than any other age group. Injury and motor vehicle data from Alberta is consistent with national and international research in identifying this age and gender group as the target audience for traffic safety and occupant restraint initiatives.^{9,18,19,20,21}

A seat belt study, conducted in Beaumont, Alberta in 2001, showed that high risk drivers who do not comply with existing seat belt legislation will only be influenced by stronger legislative strategies, such as higher fines and demerits.⁹ The study concludes that the maximum fine amount has been reached in Alberta. Unbelted male drivers indicated that demerits, not increased fines, would be necessary to change their behaviour in relation to buckling up.

To find out more about these high risk drivers, Criterion Research conducted focus tests with young male drivers who do not wear their seat belts.²² Their report indicates that this population would not be motivated to change their behaviour by traditional communication methods such as television ads, radio campaigns or brochures. This population tends to engage in other risk taking behaviours such as drinking and driving and intersection violations, and many have multiple offences or drive while suspended. Findings from the focus groups indicate that fines are not a primary motivator, as these young males have

the ability to pay the fine. Focus group participants stated they would change their behaviour and buckle up if demerits were attached to seat belt offences. Their motivation for this change in behaviour would be a result of not wanting to lose their license.

An additional benefit of the introduction of demerits would be decreased death and injury rates and decreased health care costs for treating traffic related injuries. A study by Lenehan et al found a 10% reduction in road traffic fatalities, a 20% reduction in nonfatal injuries and a 20% reduction country-wide in road traffic crash related hospital attendances in the 12 months following introduction of demerit points for non-wearing of seat belts in Ireland.²³

In consultation with traffic safety partners across the province, AORP has found that the introduction of demerits for seat belt offences is well supported. Partners in health, enforcement, justice, injury prevention, trauma care and the general public all expressed strong support for the introduction of demerits for seat belt offences.

Position

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