

I. INTRODUCTION

Many terms used in this report may be unfamiliar to some readers. Therefore, a Glossary can be found on page 43 to assist readers.

Child Safety Restraint Use and Misuse in the United States

The effectiveness of properly used child safety restraints is clearly established - 71 percent effective in reducing fatal injury for infants and 54 percent for toddlers in passenger cars according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) (NHTSA, 2001). Since effectiveness is based on correct use, safety may be compromised if the restraint is not installed correctly in the vehicle, if the child is not buckled into the restraint correctly, and if the safety seat used is not age and size appropriate for the child (NHTSA, 2002).

In August 2002, the National SAFE KIDS Campaign analyzed the incorrect use patterns of more than 37,000 child safety seats and vehicle safety belts at SAFE KIDS BUCKLE UP car seat check up events from February 2001 to May 2002. Findings of the study revealed that 81.6 percent of child restraints were used incorrectly, with an average of three errors per incorrectly used restraint (National SAFE KIDS Campaign, 2002).

According to the NHTSA's 2000 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey, when asked how easy it was to attach the car seat to the vehicle, 97 percent of parents/caregivers responded either very confident (74 percent) or fairly confident (23 percent) that the seat was securely attached. A later question in the survey revealed that more than one-quarter of respondents had on some occasion found that their car seat was not attached securely.

The Lower Anchors and Tethers for CHildren (LATCH) federal motor vehicle safety standard (FMVSS) that became effective in September 2002 will help alleviate some misuse patterns. LATCH, FMVSS 213 (49 CFR 571.213) amendments and FMVSS 225 (49 CFR 571.225), requires vehicles and child safety seats manufactured after September 1, 2002 to be equipped with anchors and attachments to allow child safety seat installation without seat belts. While the NHTSA estimates that the LATCH system will reduce as much as half the misuse associated with improperly installing a child safety seat, LATCH does not eliminate all mistakes. (NHTSA, 2002). Additionally, many families will continue to own non-LATCH equipped vehicles and safety seats for many years.

Overview of Inspection Station Services in the United States

To help reduce misuse of safety seats, highway safety organizations, public safety agencies, medical facilities, safety associations, auto dealerships, and other groups across the country offer safety seat check-up "inspection" or "fitting" stations. At these inspection stations, technicians offer hands-on training about the proper use and installation of child restraints, and advise parents and caregivers as to what restraint is age and size appropriate for their child passengers.

According to NHTSA, as of November 2002 more than 3,500 inspection stations were in operation across the United States. Most of these stations were initiated within the last five years, often with only informal guidance as to how stations might best be designed to achieve their service objectives.

Inspection station services are typically provided free of charge, although some stations request a donation for each seat inspected. Many inspection stations also offer replacement safety seats. Policies for the distribution of replacement seats vary, often depending on the funding source. Some stations will provide replacement seats as a convenience to parents/caregivers, but ask for a donation to cover the cost of the seat.

Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study were to identify and describe characteristics of model child safety seat inspection stations through observations and discourse at selected inspection stations. Specific areas of inquiry were as follows:

1. How the inspection station was developed;
2. Procedural, logistical, staffing, funding and other characteristics of the station;
3. Implementation issues and challenges identified by inspection station staff;
4. Perceptions of the implementation process and recommendations for improvement by inspection station staff;
5. Recommendations for improvement by parents and caregivers;
6. Types of child safety seat misuse encountered by inspectors; and
7. Magnitude of child safety seat misuse encountered by the stations.