

Commentary

Seat Belt Use in Argentina—A 10-Year Struggle

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Can a nongovernmental organization influence or determine seat belt use in a nation? The problems that implementing such a simple, yet effective, measure for traffic safety may trigger in a developing country are impossible to imagine. Just having the right laws is not enough: A great effort is necessary to create awareness and inform the population, but the governmental authorities in Argentina are not doing this, nor do they show any interest in it. In most of the developing countries, the situation is similar. Starting from a diagnosis of seat belt use by means of systematic observations, a program of awareness and massive education was developed for national radio and TV about the advantages of seat belt use. The first stage of this program was launched at the end of 1991, and it continues to this day. Articles in newspapers and communications and requests on the same subject sent to public officials also have helped mobilize public opinion on seat belt use. After 10 years of systematic and continued work by a nongovernmental organization, seat belt use is now part of the government's agenda and there is a high rate of "almost voluntary" seat belt use. The voluntary seat belt use in the city of Buenos Aires has reached 26.9%, and in national highways 58.9%. The roads that have been traveled in Argentina (documented with follow-up statistics) may be useful as guidelines for other countries that are starting this process, and may help to shorten times, avoid pitfalls, and save lives since it is estimated that 1,100 more lives could be saved every year in Argentina when seat belts become the norm.

Keywords Awareness; Enforcement; Penalties; Public Campaign; Seat Belts

COMMENTARY ON THE NGO CAMPAIGN

"Luchemos por la Vida" is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization (NGO), oriented toward public good. It strives to prevent traffic accidents in our country (Argentina) and to achieve as soon as possible what many would consider utopian: that no more people die in our country as a result of traffic accidents. Significantly, "Luchemos por la Vida" means "Let's fight for life."

Chaotic, irregular, and deadly traffic caused 7,533 deaths in 2000 (see Figure 1), more than 100,000 injuries ranging from light to serious, thousands of handicapped people, and appalling material losses which add up to \$10 billion annually according to our estimates. The traffic accident death rate is 7 to 10 times higher than that of developed countries, when we take into ac-

count the number of vehicles circulating in Argentina (estimated at 6,440,000).

But this terrible situation, which has been repeating itself over the past years, does not happen "by accident." It is the consequence of anarchy in traffic caused by public officials who show no concern, and the indifference of the majority of people. Both groups are unaware of the seriousness of this situation. From its very first day this association has worked to press for the use of seat belts in Argentina, as part of its mission to save lives in traffic accidents. The steps and the corresponding results follow.

In 1990, when the association had just been founded, we launched our first poster aimed at promoting seat belt use. Simultaneously, we carried out the first measurement of the number of people using them. At that time, this figure was practically zero. Most of the drivers did not know why seat belts were in the car and many tied them behind the seat, so they "didn't bother." By then, when we made our first measurement, only 0.2% used seat belts in the city of Buenos Aires, the capital and most important city of Argentina (3 million inhabitants).

As soon as we had the possibility of broadcasting messages on traffic safety on TV and radio, seat belts were the topic of one of the first four spots and they were also mentioned in the second

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For more information about traffic safety in Argentina, visit our website:
<http://www.luchemos.org.ar>

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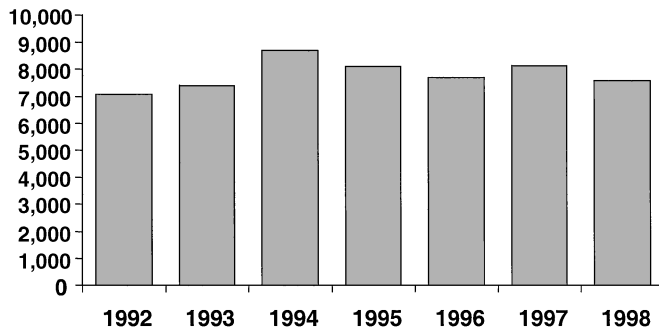


Figure 1 Traffic accidents in Argentina: number of deaths in 1992–1998.

clip on TV in mid-1992. At the same time, “Luchemos por la Vida” began to be invited to TV and radio programs where seat belts were the central and repeated topic, in spite of the surprise and lack of information by journalists and audiences.

In our first visits to the national authorities asking for solutions to the serious problem of traffic accidents, we continuously stressed the need to make seat belt use obligatory, at least in front seats. A terrible accident that happened in April 1992 triggered new traffic legislation that picked up the project of “Luchemos por la Vida” on the obligatory use of seat belts. At that stage, only 3.1% used seat belts.

On July 1, 1992, seat belt use became obligatory in Argentina, both in front seats as well as in rear seats, and usage climbed to 32% without any type of control. Unfortunately, the impact of the new legislation soon disappeared due a total lack of controls. However, in November 1992, faced with the insistent demands of many people and institutions, including “Luchemos por la Vida,” the chief of police announced that “the following day they would control seat belt use, and there would be penalties.” Usage went up to 36%.

But this was short lived. Seat belt use was never controlled seriously, not on the following day nor ever, in spite of our many demands so it was left to each person’s decision and the sole influence of the growing campaign of our association. In Table I, the percentage of seat belt use since November 1990 is shown

Table I Usage of seat belts in the city of Buenos Aires (1990–99)

	Driver (%)	Front passenger (%)
November 1990	0.2	0.1
November 1991	1.3	1.0
April 1992	6.3	3.7
Seat belt law		
July 1992	32.0	30.0
July 1993	18.0	17.0
July 1994	15.0	13.0
July 1995	13.0	11.0
New law and “Let’s fight for life” campaign		
April 1996	38.2	36.1
November 1997	17.1	13.2
November 1998	16.6	14.4
November 1999	26.9	24.1

year by year, according to measurements of our association. The slight increases in usage coincide in general with our campaigns on TV and radio.

In 1998 “Luchemos por la Vida” decided to step up actions—according to its possibilities—aiming at increasing awareness among the greatest number of people about the benefits of using seat belts, on the one hand, and trying to get authorities to understand once and for all that making the seat belt use compulsory could save many lives.

Since it would be too lengthy to indicate all the actions that have been carried out since 1990, I will simply detail those accomplished in the campaign we launched starting May 1, 1999, to date. I must say that, in preparation for this new campaign, we aired one new short clip—of the “hard” emotional type—on TV and radio during the first 4 months of that year.

The campaign we launched on May 1 was designated “Let’s save 1,100 lives by using the seat belt.” It started with a very intense TV and radio campaign based on the objections, myths, and false beliefs of the majority of the population regarding the use of seat belts, and providing instructions on the consequences of not being buckled up when there are accidents as well as the benefits of using seat belts. Out of the four short clips that we produced dedicated to promoting seat belt use in the city, even for a few blocks, with children, and in the rear seat too, we went on to others.

The TV and radio clips were, and still are, shown widely daily in the 5 most important TV channels in Argentina (three times a day on average in each one) and around 40 TV channels in the provinces as well as on the 13 most important national radio stations and 200 more stations in the interior. Airing these clips has been provided for free—and continues to be so—in some cases due to a resolution in the broadcasting law in Argentina, and in the majority of cases thanks to help received from the media.

We sent 25 certified letters to the president and to each one of the governors, stressing their responsibility in the 1,100 deaths every year inasmuch as they did not control seat belt use, and asking them also to provide a good example in using them themselves (because in our country authorities in general do not comply with the seat belt law). We sent 1,027 letters to each of the city mayors in the country similar in nature to those sent to the governors.

We promoted seat belt use through all the concession-holders of the tolled highways in diverse ways. For example, through the personal recommendation of tollgate clerks when handing the ticket or change (“Don’t forget to wear your seat belt”) or by means of billboards on highways recommending seat belt use. We posted ads on this topic. We asked the main radio and TV journalists to mention briefly every day the advantages of using seat belts, which has been done and is done by many. We asked the main newspapers to highlight in their news on accidents those cases in which the victim was not buckled up and died as a result.

Thus in the case of an accident involving by a popular former president of Argentina, Raúl Alfonsín, who was thrown out of

Table II Usage of seat belts (only private cars, November 1999)

	%
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City of Buenos Aires	
Driver	26.9
Front passenger	24.1
Rear passenger	3.9
National roads and highways	
Driver	58.9
Front passenger	49.5

the car because he was not wearing his seat belt and nearly died, we were able to get the main newspaper in Argentina Clarín to feature this topic on its front page. As a result of all these activities, we saw a noticeable increase in seat belt use by the end of 1999 (see Table II). This is far from what we would like, but we are approaching the levels of developed countries through “voluntary use” as a consequence of awareness and education.

Unfortunately, authorities do not take responsibility for enforcing the law. We consider it would suffice to take a step further

in carrying out controls and we are sure that if permanent and widespread controls were established, given the present state of awareness of the population and the circumstances described above, we would immediately achieve a seat belt usage of over 80%, with great chances of remaining at this level.

But, in spite of everything, this activity which focuses on increasing awareness of the population and the media, together with countless and insistent demands to all the authorities, has been successful in putting this topic in the agendas of politicians who in one way or other and in a short time will feel forced to establish serious and efficient controls on seat belt use due to the circumstances indicated above. This should be the final thrust, even though long overdue, to make seat belt use widespread in that part of the population (as in the rest of the world) that needs to put into practice what they are theoretically or intellectually convinced is good or useful, by means of persuasion or adequate enforcement.

This would enable 900 lives to be saved in the first year, and 1,100 in every subsequent year once usage has become nearly total.