

Informing State Senators and a Law's Effect on Public Behavior

By Lenny Jason

Another example of this type of work involves a study undertaken in collaborative with the Child Passenger Restraint Association. Each year thousands of children are injured or killed in motor vehicle accidents. In fact, for children under age 1, it is one of the leading causes of death. The majority of these injuries and fatalities could be prevented if appropriate child restraints were used. Legislation mandating the use of such restraints represents a viable strategy for dealing with this pressing social problem. My research team at DePaul University decided to do a study, in collaboration with the Child Passenger Restraint Association, to evaluate the effects of sending technical information to Illinois legislators prior to a vote on a Child Passenger Restraint bill (Jason & Rose, 1984). The information was sent to the State Senators. In that letter, the Senators were informed that 140 children in Illinois were killed and 25,828 injured in automobile accidents between 1975 and 1981. In addition, from data collected during a nine-month period, the Senators were also informed that 93 percent of Illinois children were not placed in appropriate restraints when they rode in automobiles. Finally, the Senators were given the results of a citizen survey in which 78 percent of the adults questioned responded that they supported passage of the Child Passenger Restraint bill. The majority of Senators receiving the letter voted for passage of the bill.

On July 1, 1983, the Illinois Child Passenger Restraint Law went into effect. Any child under age four is now required to be secured in an approved child restraint system while riding in a vehicle, and any child between the ages of 4 and 6 is required to be placed in either an approved child restraint system or a seat belt. As a result of that law, infant use of appropriate restraints has increased from 49 to 74 percent, and for children aged 1 to 4 years, use of these restraints has increased from 13 to 42 percent. Accident data are also available for a period from two years before enactment of the Child Passenger Restraint law to two years after. After the law went into effect, deaths of children in Illinois due to traffic accidents decreased by 53 percent (Fawcett, Seekins, & Jason, 1987).

Fawcett, S. B., Seekins, T., & Jason, L. A. (1987). Policy research and child passenger safety legislation: A case study and experimental evaluation. *Journal of Social Issues*, 43, 133-148.

Jason, L.A., Rose, T. (1984). Influencing the passage of child passenger restraint legislation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 12, 485-495.