An alternative theory is that the political push for belt use laws during the mid 1980s sensitized police and NASS investigators to the importance of belts. Some may have taken the illogical step of assuming that if the person died, the belts were not in use. I have read court testimony by police officers that made such an assumption. In one of the recent studies claiming high belt effectiveness, missing data on velocity changes in crashes were imputed partly from injury severity scores, again a cause imputed from an effect and then used as a control in the study, a true scientific “no-no.” I suspect that, in the past, I and others placed too much emphasis on the problem of self reports by crash survivors and not enough emphasis on the potential bias of investigators judging the cause based on the outcome. Of course, that is why we require double blind studies in assessing the effects and safety of drugs rather than rely on the judgments of physicians and patients who know which drug was taken and the outcome. Would that all injury prevention researchers were as careful. This field is littered with the tainted reputations of well intentioned people who made overly zealous claims of effectiveness of counterfeit measures.

What is needed is an objective measure of belt use and other conditions, such as speed and crash forces, in crashes. Such a measure may be forthcoming with the installation of “black boxes” in vehicles that provide a measure of such conditions. If the manufacturers install them in sufficient numbers and make the codes available for qualified independent researchers to read the data, we will at last be able to know the effectiveness of seat belts. If so, I expect that it will be nearer 40%–45% than 60%–65%.

Injury Prevention 2002; 8:263

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