

Mandated Airline Safety Seats Won't Increase Travel Safety

by John Semmens

Last year three unrestrained children were killed in two separate airline crashes. Speculating that these children might have survived had they been belted into child safety seats, the National Transportation Safety Board has proposed that the federal government require such seats for infants and toddlers flying on commercial airlines. Proponents of the regulation point out that adult passengers are provided with seat belts. Why shouldn't small children be equally protected? Should parents be allowed to save money by risking their children's lives? Shouldn't the government make them behave more responsibly?

This all sounds very plausible. Who can be against safety? Yet, like so many other paternalistic schemes, the overlooked cost factor will undermine even the best intentions.

Safety regulation advocates frequently assert that we should be willing to pay whatever it takes to assure safety, especially when children are involved. The reality, though, is that our means are limited. We can't buy all the safety imaginable. Consumers must fit travel safety into a family budget, along with food, clothing, medical care, and shelter.

If parents with small children are required to buy an additional airline ticket to cover the safety seat rather than carry these children on their laps, three responses are possible. One possibility is that parents will, in fact, sacrifice some other expenditure in order to pay for the child's seat. However, child safety seats are currently available, and many

parents don't buy them. Also, just as restaurants can refuse service to people without shoes or shirts, airlines could refuse to carry a child without his being belted into a safety seat. That most parents and airlines don't voluntarily incur this expense indicates that there is consumer resistance to buying an additional ticket for a small child.

We shouldn't assume that such choices are inherently bad. The chance of an accident for any given airline departure is one in 300,000. The chance that a safety seat would make a difference is even less. Airline travel is safe and has been getting safer over the years. It is hardly irrational or irresponsible for a family to balk at paying an extra amount, possibly hundreds of dollars, for the remote chance that it will buy more safety.

Sacrificing some other expenditure to pay for the child's extra ticket isn't the only option available to parents. They might decide to make the trip by alternate means. A most likely choice will be the family car. However, statistics show that intercity automobile travel is much more dangerous than commercial air travel. The fatality rate for commercial airlines is about three deaths per 10 billion passenger miles. The fatality rate for auto transportation is about 220 deaths per 10 billion vehicle miles. In short, a family's chances of being killed on a trip are 70 times higher in the family car than on an airline.

If the additional cost of the child's safety seat leads to more automobile travel, not only would the regulation induce a family to select a less desired transportation option, it would also increase their risk. Even if only 2 percent of the parents with children small enough to be affected by the proposed regulation opt for auto transporta-

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tion, the regulation will have the net result of increasing total travel fatalities. The few lives saved by the rule will be more than offset by the dozens or even hundreds of lives lost in highway accidents.

The surge in air travel following the deregulation-inspired price cuts suggests that the decision to fly is highly sensitive to the cost. Since the families affected by a mandatory child safety seat rule would typically see their air transportation cost rise by 25 to 50 percent, the shift to auto is likely to be much greater than 2 percent.

A final option for a family facing the higher cost of air travel under the new regulation would be to not make the trip at all. Once again people would be forced to accept a less desired alternative. But while staying at home won't expose them to the hazards of air or highway travel, neither will it guarantee perfect safety. Whatever activity is substituted for the forgone travel will have its own hazards. For example, in the past year more tod-

dlers died in backyard swimming pool accidents in Phoenix than died due to the lack of child safety seats on airlines in the entire nation.

All this is not to say that using an airline safety seat is a bad idea. People can be informed of the benefits and costs, and encouraged to choose wisely. But they should be allowed to choose for themselves. The world is complex. The needs and wants of people are diverse. Attempting to force everyone into the same choice, as the proposed child safety seat rule would do, diminishes individual freedom and, as we have seen, enlarges hidden risks.

The notion that there is an inevitable trade-off between freedom and safety is false. Regulatory suppression of free choice can very likely decrease safety. Rather than using governmental power to coerce people into less satisfying and sometimes more dangerous alternatives, why not leave them free to choose for themselves? □

Air Bags—More Government Hot Air?

by Anthony Young

The automobile today is as much a product of government regulation as of corporate design and innovation. For decades automobile manufacturers designed and built cars without government intrusion. That ended in the 1960s. The automobile suddenly became the focus of environmental activists and safety advocates. The number of regulations affecting cars in the late 60s amounted to only a trickle at first, but quickly reached storm surge proportions in the 1970s.

Manufacturers were forced to redirect much of their design and engineering manpower to the new wave of regulations. New words and phrases entered the automotive lexicon: emissions, impact absorbing bumpers, crash-worthiness, rollover

standards, passive restraints.

The last of these—passive restraints—proved the most abhorrent to the manufacturers, and the companies worked tirelessly to prevent such legislation from being passed. The car makers argued that such devices were complex, very costly, and embraced unproven technology. Some cautioned that in certain circumstances air bags, as they came to be known, might even be dangerous. There was also the fear of product liability lawsuits in the rare instances where the air bags failed to inflate.

The insurance industry lobbied for implementation of passive restraints, stating air bags would save lives and reduce injuries; air bags would also save the insurance companies millions of dollars in claims.

The debate raged for years. Seat belt interlocks

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