

# Issue Brief

## Booster Seats: Securing the Safety of Our Children

### Introduction

Motor vehicle crashes continue to be the leading cause of death among children in Kentucky and the United States. Kentucky law requires young children under 40 inches tall to ride in a car seat and older children to wear seat belts. Yet, current state law leaves children ages 4 through 7 unprotected. Those who have outgrown their toddler car seat but are not yet 4 feet 9 inches tall risk serious injury or death when not riding in a booster seat. Kentucky can close the gap in vehicle occupant protection laws by requiring children ages 4 up to their 8th birthday to ride in a booster seat.

### Child deaths in Kentucky

Kentucky ranks 32nd among states on the rate of child deaths, and recent trends show little promise for improving that ranking.<sup>1</sup> While the national trend shows improvement, Kentucky's trend represents an increase in the child death rate since 2000 (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>

Fifty-five children ages 4 through 7 died in motor vehicle accidents between 2000 and 2005 in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> During that time, more than seven thousand additional children in this age group were injured in motor vehicle crashes.<sup>4</sup> The use of a booster seat could have prevented many of these deaths and injuries from occurring.

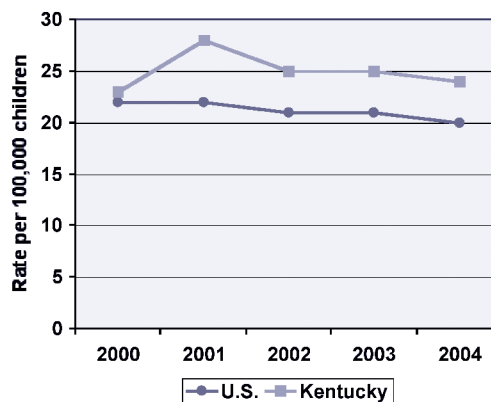
### What is a booster seat?

Booster seats raise children up and position the vehicle seat belt appropriately over the strongest parts of the body – the hips and collar bone. Without a booster seat, the seat belt often rides up on a child's belly and the shoulder belt crosses their neck. In a crash, an improperly-positioned belt can cause serious injury to internal organs, spinal cord damage, and even death.

### Booster seats keep young children safe

The Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center conducted an analysis of data on crash outcomes in Kentucky, and the findings confirm the importance of using a booster seat. The research suggests that children ages 4 up to age 8 using a child safety seat were 40 percent less likely to be hospitalized after

**Fig. 1 Child Death Rates among Children Ages 1-14, 2000-2004**



Source: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, KIDS COUNT Data Center Online.

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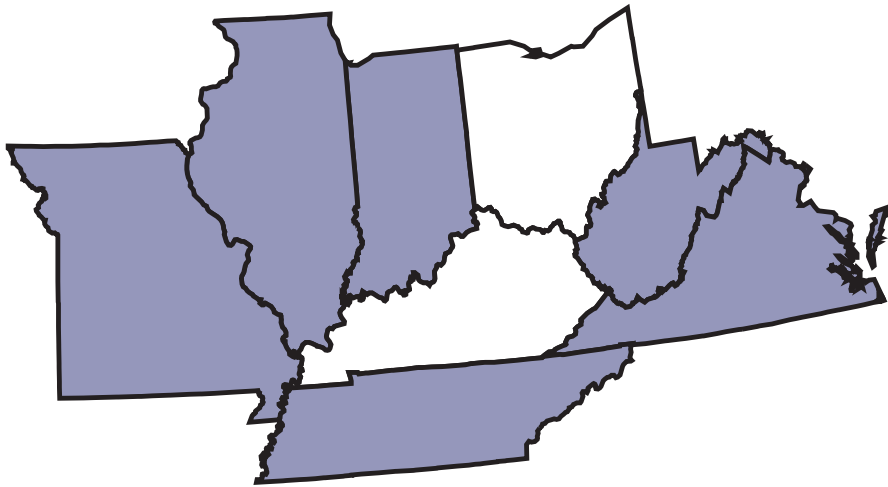
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**Fig. 2 Booster Seat Laws in States Surrounding Kentucky**



Source: The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (2008). *Child restraint laws*. Available at <http://www.iihs.org>.

a crash.<sup>5</sup> Of those hospitalized, children using a safety seat spent less time in the hospital (31 percent less), had less severe injuries (18 percent less), and incurred lower hospital charges (16 percent less).<sup>6</sup>

#### Booster seat laws in other states

Thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring the use of booster seats for young children.<sup>7</sup> These states include all states bordering Kentucky, with the exception of Ohio (see Figure 2.) Research conducted in Tennessee and Wisconsin after passage of booster seat laws indicate that the laws achieved the desired effect of increasing booster seat use.<sup>8,9</sup>

#### Reducing child deaths and injuries in Kentucky

Kentucky has taken action to reduce child deaths in recent years, requiring children under 16 years of age to wear a helmet when riding on an all-terrain vehicle and making the law requiring a seat belt law a primary offense, meaning law enforcement officers can pull over a car for that violation alone. Still, a significant gap exists in laws governing motor vehicle occupants with the lack of a booster seat law. Current law fails to set adequate guidelines to keep children ages 4 through 7 safe in motor vehicle crashes.

Kentucky should reduce injuries and deaths among young Kentuckians with the passage of a booster seat law that requires children ages 4 up to their 8th birthday to ride in a booster seat, unless they are 4 feet 9 inches tall or taller.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Annie E. Casey Foundation (2007). *2007 KIDS COUNT Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Data from the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Vital Statistics Branch. Processed by the Kentucky State Data Center.
- 4 Data from Kentucky State Police. Processed by Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center.
- 5 Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center (2007). *Nonfatal Traffic Injuries in Booster-age Child Passengers in Kentucky from 2000-2004*. Lexington, KY: Kentucky Injury Prevention and Research Center.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (2008). *Child restraint laws*. Available at <http://www.iihs.org>.
- 8 Gunn, V., Phillippi, R., and Cooper, W. (2007). "Improvement in Booster Seat Use in Tennessee." *Pediatrics*, vol. 119.
- 9 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2007). "Preliminary Data Indicate That Booster Seat Laws Increase Child Safety Seat Use." *Traffic Tech*, no. 331.