

## NEWS RELEASE

*Embargoed until 13 August 2009*

# 50 YEARS OF THE SEAT BELT: SAVING LIVES IN VEHICLES

**13 August 2009, Brussels** - Today exactly 50 years ago, the first car equipped with a standard seat belt was delivered. The patent for a modern 3-point seat belt was filed by Nils Ivar Bohlin, a Swedish engineer four days later with the US patent office. Since then, the standard seat belt has prevented more than one million people from dying in a vehicle crash. In the EU alone, seat belts have saved 13,000 lives in 2008. At least 4,300 deaths could have been additionally prevented in the same year if all car occupants in crashes had been belted.

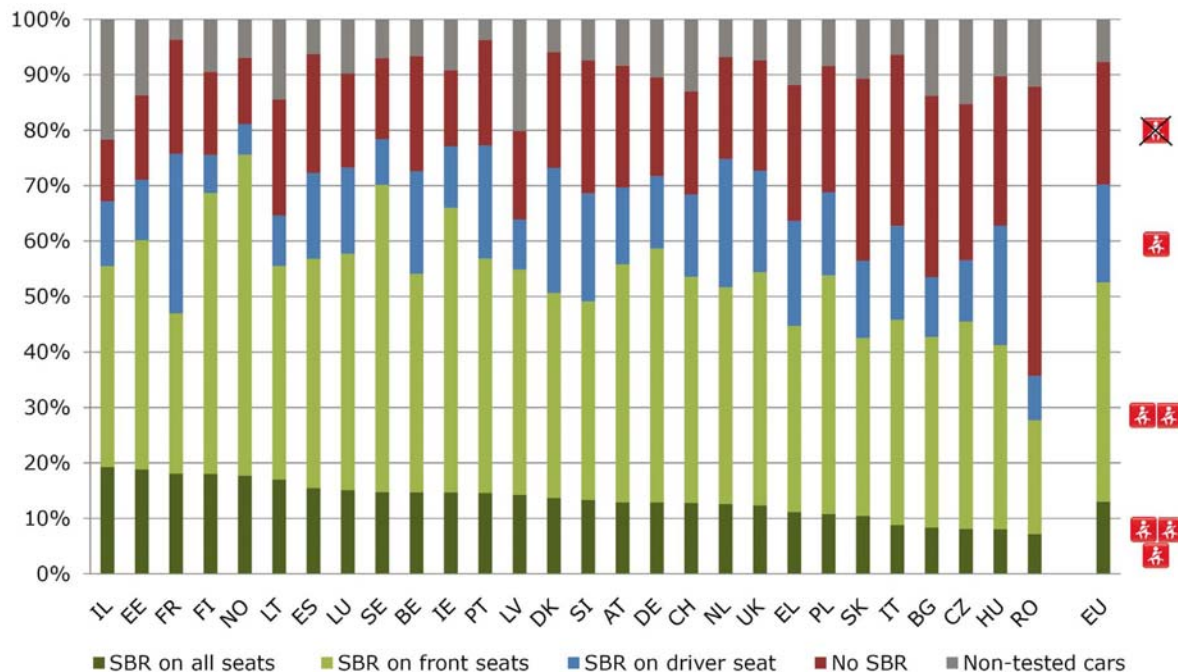
The 3-Point safety was the world's most important safety innovation. It appeared for the first time in a Volvo PV544 delivered on Thursday August 13<sup>th</sup> 1959 to a dealer in the Swedish town of Kristianstad. It has become the most important automotive restraint system worldwide, saving an estimated one million lives so far. The seatbelt spread quickly throughout the world also thanks to an early release of the patent to all car manufacturers. Today, virtually every automotive vehicle on the planet is equipped with it. 50 years later, the vehicle occupant that buckles up before taking to the road has a 50% better chance of surviving an accident.

Despite EU legislation mandating seat belt use, the usage of seat belts remains below 90% on front seats and below 70% on rear seats of passenger cars in the EU-27. The usage by the drivers of vans and duty vehicles is even lower. Huge differences exist between different Member States. High rates are common in Nordic countries and some Western European countries, while they are much lower in Southern and Eastern Europe.

The implication of non use of belts on rear seats is still underestimated by the majority of drivers. Studies have found that unbelted rear passengers - who are thrown forward into the back of the front seats - increase the risk of deaths for belted front-seat occupants nearly fivefold.

Seat Belt Reminders (SBRs) appear to be an effective way to encourage vehicle occupants to buckle up. However, they are present in only a small proportion of vehicles in the EU. A recent ETSC<sup>(1)</sup> Road Safety Performance Index (PIN)<sup>(2)</sup> ranking, which looked at penetration of SBRs in new passenger cars sold in 2008 in 30 countries, showed that in 2008 77% of cars were equipped with a SBR for the driver seat in the EU.

*"In the event of a crash, the seat belt remains the single most important passive safety feature in vehicles and airbags cannot replace it. The presence of a seat belt and the legislation making this mandatory are not enough to make all car occupants to buckle up. Penalty point systems, regular police checks and introduction of seat belt reminders have shown to be the most effective policy interventions up to now."* said Vojtech Eksler, policy analyst at ETSC.



**Fig.1: Seat belt reminders in new passenger cars sold in 2008**  
 (Proportion of cars awarded 3,2,1 and 0 points and proportion of non-tested passenger cars, ranked by the number of cars awarded 3 points for seat belt reminders (1<sup>st</sup> point attributed if driver seat is equipped, 2<sup>nd</sup> for front passenger seat and 3<sup>rd</sup> for rear passenger seats equipped)).

Detailed figures available at: [http://www.etsc.eu/documents/Background%20tables\\_Flash13.pdf](http://www.etsc.eu/documents/Background%20tables_Flash13.pdf)  
 Pg.6, Tab.4

Seat belt wearing rates in EU countries are available at:  
[http://www.erso.eu/safetynet/fixed/WP3/sn\\_wp3\\_d3p11a\\_spi\\_updated\\_country\\_comparisons\\_final.pdf](http://www.erso.eu/safetynet/fixed/WP3/sn_wp3_d3p11a_spi_updated_country_comparisons_final.pdf)  
 Pg.12-13, Tab.5.1,5.2

European rules on seat belt use are set out in the Directive 2003/20/EC.  
<http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/06/583&format=HTML&aged=0&language=en&quiLanguage=en>

More than 39,000 people died in road crashes in EU27 in 2008, around 55% of them were vehicle occupants. ([www.erso.eu](http://www.erso.eu))

#### Notes to Editors:

(1) **The European Transport Safety Council (ETSC)** is a Brussels-based independent non-profit making organisation dedicated to the reduction of the number and severity of transport crashes in Europe. The ETSC seeks to identify and promote research-based measures with a high safety potential. It brings together 42 national and international organisations concerned with transport safety from across Europe. [www.etsc.eu](http://www.etsc.eu)

(2) **The Road Safety Performance Index (PIN)** Programme was launched in June 2006 to compare country road safety performances. It currently includes 30 countries. <http://www.etsc.eu/PIN> You can download the complete Road Safety PIN Flash 13 "Boosting the market for safer cars across the EU", April 2009, at [www.etsc.eu/PIN-publications.php](http://www.etsc.eu/PIN-publications.php). Background Tables and Methodological Note can be downloaded from the same address.