TRAFFIC INJURY RESEARCH FOUNDATION

VEHICLE SAFETY FEATURES: KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS, AND DRIVING HABITS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TIRF

The knowledge source for safe driving

THE TRAFFIC INJURY RESEARCH FOUNDATION

The mission of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to reduce traffic-related deaths and injuries. TIRF is a national, independent, charitable road safety research institute. Since its inception in 1964, TIRF has become internationally recognized for its accomplishments in a wide range of subject areas related to identifying the causes of road crashes and developing programs and policies to address them effectively.

Traffic Injury Research Foundation
171 Nepean Street, Suite 200
Ottawa, Ontario K2P 0B4
Ph: (613) 238-5235
Fax: (613) 238-5292
Email: tirf@tirf.ca
Website: www.tirf.ca

June 2012
Traffic Injury Research Foundation

ISBN: 978-1-926857-32-9

FINANCIAL SUPPORT PROVIDED BY:

VEHICLE SAFETY FEATURES: KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS, AND DRIVING HABITS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Robyn D. Robertson / Ward G.M. Vanlaar / Kyla D. Marcoux / Heather J. McAteer

Traffic Injury Research Foundation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This report contains the results of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation's (TIRF) investigation into Canadian drivers' perceptions of, attitudes towards, and familiarity with ten modern vehicle safety features: anti-lock braking systems (ABS), traction control, brake assist, electronic stability control (ESC), electronic brake-force distribution, adaptive headlights, collision warning systems, lane departure warning systems, brake override, and driver monitoring systems.
- TIRF also investigated the effect of vehicle safety features on driving. Specifically, whether and to what extent different beliefs about safety features may influence some drivers to drive less carefully by engaging in one or more of six dangerous driving behaviours, including driving well over the speed limit, driving while distracted, driving while tired or fatigued, falling asleep at the wheel, drinking and driving, and failing to wear a seat belt.
- A public opinion poll was developed and conducted by TIRF containing 120 items designed to explore a range of issues relating to vehicle safety features and driving habits. The majority of questions used a scale from one to six where six indicated high agreement, concern, or support and one indicated low agreement, concern, or support. A total of 2,506 Canadians completed the poll; 832 over the phone and 1,674 online.
- Safety is a high priority for drivers making vehicle purchasing decisions. Consistent with results from other studies, drivers continue to cite safety as an important consideration when buying a new vehicle, along with price, reliability, and fuel efficiency.
- With the exception of ABS and traction control, less than one-third of Canadian drivers reported being familiar with various modern safety features such as ESC, brake assist, adaptive headlights, and collision warning systems. In addition, it was found that male drivers tend to be more familiar with safety features than female drivers.
- Despite the fact that many Canadians lack familiarity with several safety features, the majority of drivers nevertheless report that they believe safety features would be easy to use. Again, male drivers were found to be more likely to agree that safety features are easy to use than female drivers.
- As drivers age, they are more likely to think that safety features will make them better drivers. In addition, drivers who agree that safety features will make them better drivers are also many times more likely to say that they would use a particular safety feature if their vehicle had it.
- When asked whether they would drink and drive if their vehicle was equipped with modern safety features, 7.5% of Canadian drivers said that they would be likely or very likely to do so, compared to 3.2% who reported that they currently often drink and drive. These results suggest that some drivers are more willing to engage in what many consider to be the most serious road safety issue (i.e., drinking and driving) when they know that they have modern safety features on their vehicle.
- Further examples of behavioural adaptation suggest that some drivers are more willing to engage in dangerous behaviours when they have safety features on their vehicle. More precisely, 13.1% of drivers said that they would be likely to tailgate others if their vehicle had safety features, while 20% said that they would be likely to drive while tired or fatigued if their vehicle had safety features. These self-reported frequency ratings represent telling increases from the number of drivers who currently admit to tailgating or driving while fatigued: 8.6% and 16.0% respectively.
- In order to gauge whether Canadian drivers considered the possible negative effects of aftermarket accessories on the performance of their safety features, survey participants were asked a series of questions concerning their beliefs about aftermarket accessories. Over a third (33.8%) of Canadian drivers agreed that they assume aftermarket accessories like floor mats and remote starters are safe

because they are sold in-store. Also, nearly one-third (30.5%) of drivers said that they would buy an aftermarket accessory that was not designed for their vehicle.

- When asked whether other drivers rely too much on vehicle safety features, 64.8% of Canadians agreed that other drivers rely too much on their safety features and do not pay enough attention to driving. This suspicion is supported by the number of drivers who revealed that they would engage in dangerous driving behaviours if their vehicle was equipped with modern safety technology.
- When asked to rate their own driving in terms of safety, the most common self-rating was an eight out of ten (44.6%), three units higher than the most common rating Canadians gave to their fellow motorists (27.7% rated others a '5'). Thus, the majority of Canadian drivers feel that they are much safer than the average driver.
- Less than half (40.3%) of Canadians agreed that safety features help protect drivers in the event of a collision, while only 46.4% agreed that safety features can help protect passengers in the event of a collision. Men and drivers who reported familiarity with safety features were more likely to correctly report that safety features offer more protection to vehicle occupants in the event of a crash.
- A strong correlation was found between perceptions of the usefulness of safety features and the intention to use safety features if they are already on vehicles. Specifically, drivers who perceive safety features as useful are much more likely to report that they would use safety features if their vehicle already had them.
- The foundation has been laid for several key points to be made and for further projects aimed at improving road safety. Significant knowledge gaps have been identified, specifically for the eight newer safety features included in the survey. Canadian drivers continue to form opinions concerning the ease of use and usefulness of safety features despite lacking important details concerning the purposes and limits of safety features. In addition, a very strong link was revealed between perceiving a safety feature as useful and being willing to use it. Thus, a large part of motivating drivers to use safety features includes helping them to understand when these safety features are useful and what they are designed to do.
- Finally, the results of the survey expose the need for information regarding the safety of aftermarket accessories to be more widely disseminated and made more easily available to those who would buy aftermarket accessories. Specifically, drivers must be encouraged to purchase aftermarket accessories that are designed for their vehicles, and not to trust that these accessories are safe simply because they are sold in-store.