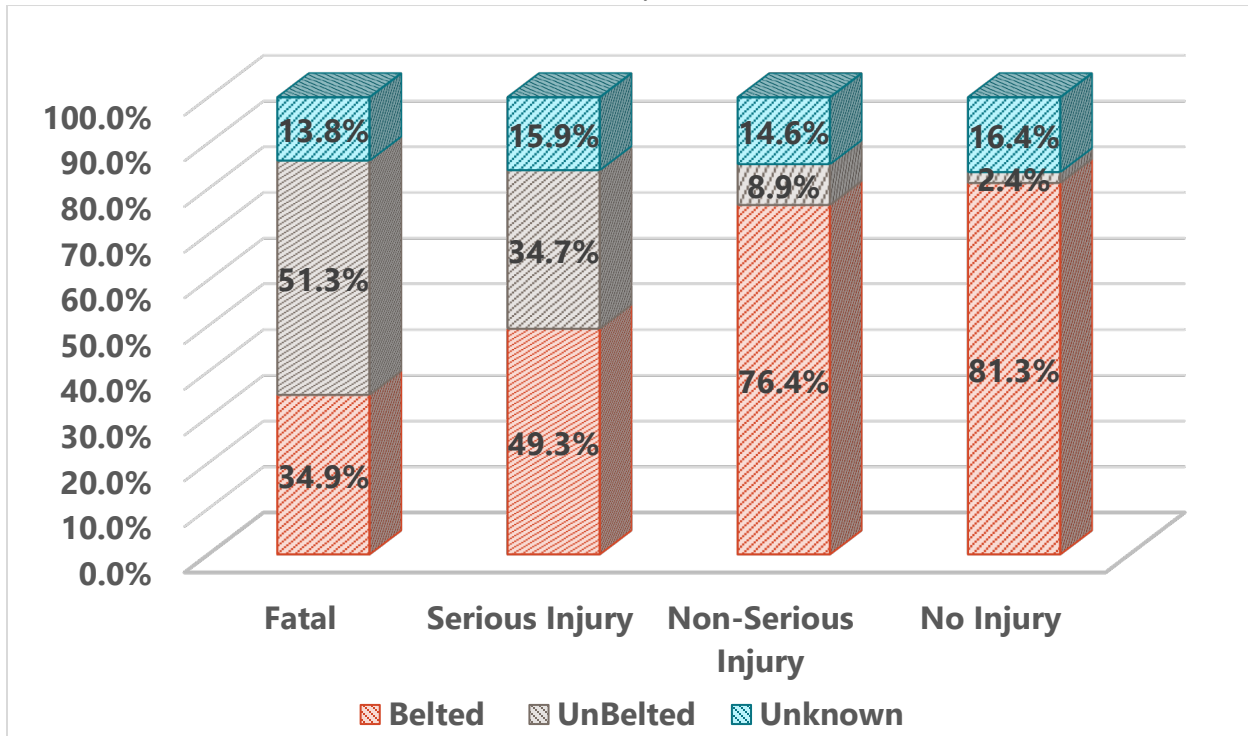


Good morning, Chairman Ruby and members of the committee. I'm Ron Henke, Director of the North Dakota Department of Transportation (NDDOT). I'm here in support of SB 2362.

More people die in unbelted crashes in North Dakota than other contributing crash factors including impaired driving, distracted driving, or speeding. So far in 2023, there have been 10 crash fatalities. Six of nine of these fatalities, where seat belts applied, were unbelted.

Crash data collected and analyzed by the NDDOT shows that over the past five years (2017-2021), 522 people died in motor vehicle crashes. Of those killed (where seat belts apply - excluding motorcyclists, bicyclists, and pedestrians), about 51% were not wearing a seat belt. This same data demonstrates in the Figure 1 below the direct correlation between seat belt use and injury severity. Unbelted vehicle occupants account for the largest percent of fatalities and serious injuries while belted occupants most commonly receive non-serious or no injuries.

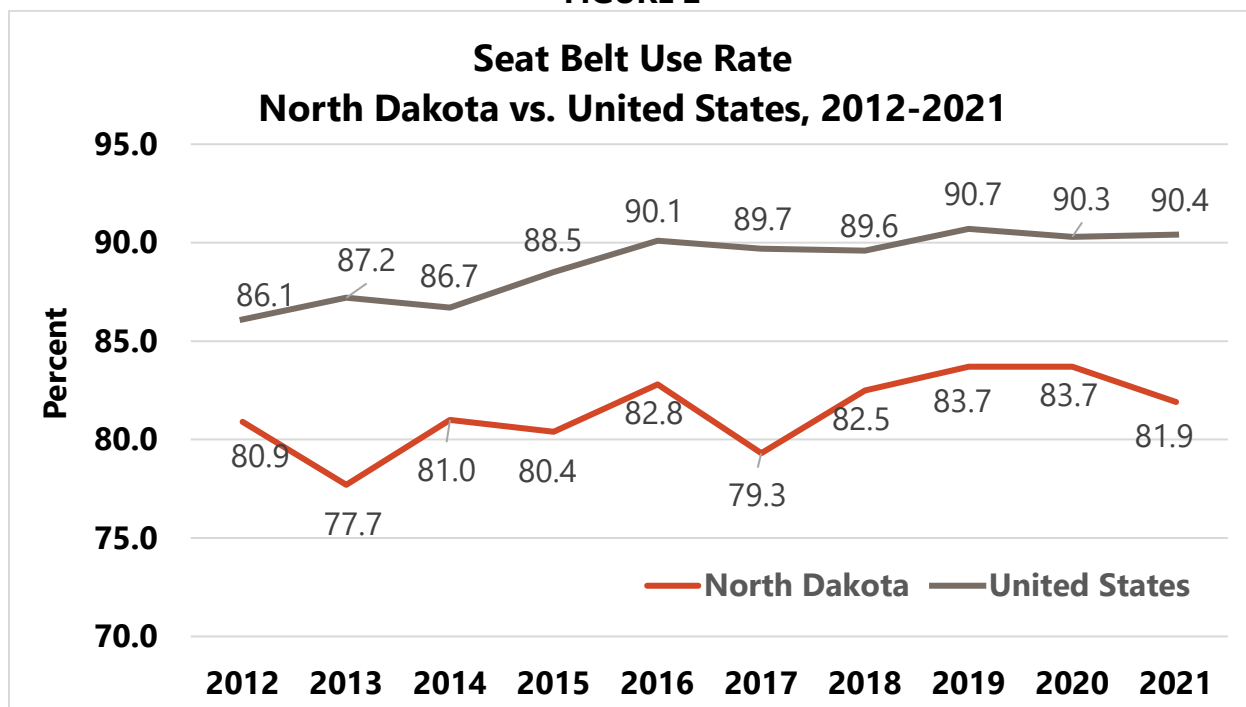
FIGURE 1
Percent of Restraint Use by Injury Classification
North Dakota, 2017-2021



An annual observational seat belt study conducted by North Dakota State University (NDSU) Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute (UGPTI) on behalf of the NDDOT shows North Dakota’s seat belt use rate in 2021 was 81.9% and dropped to 80.6% in 2022. This means that about 18-19%, or about 140,000 to 150,000 North Dakotans, are unbelted and extremely vulnerable to the consequences of a crash. Those who choose not to wear a seat belt contribute to more than half of North Dakota crash fatalities annually.

Also, North Dakota’s observed seat belt use rate has been consistently lower than the national seat belt use rate over the past 10 years (Figure 2). The national seat belt use rate in 2021 was 90.4% while North Dakota’s use rate that same year was 81.9%.

FIGURE 2



A primary seat belt law (PBL) is among the evidence-based strategies identified in the North Dakota *Vision Zero* Plan as a priority strategy for implementation because it will have immediate and significant impact to reduce crash fatalities and serious injuries in North Dakota. Research shows that states that transitioned to a PBL have experienced a 10-12% increase in their observed seat belt use. (Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration)

The citizens of North Dakota largely support a PBL. An annual study conducted by NDSU UGPTI on behalf of the NDDOT shows that 6 of 10 North Dakota citizens support a PBL. Fifty-nine percent of respondents to this survey favored a PBL in 2022. (Figure 3)

FIGURE 3

Year	Percent in Favor of a PBL in North Dakota (Strongly Favored + Somewhat Favored)
2018	62%
2019	58%
2020	61%
2021	57%
2022	59%

The work we do at the NDDOT allows us to talk to many people about seat belt use. We know that seat belts save lives. They are the single most effective traffic safety device to prevent death and injury in a motor vehicle crash. But all drivers and passengers must wear them for them to be effective.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you.