



Photo by Jonathan Mannion

Black motorist and legislators fear federal seat belt laws would give police too much latitude to stop drivers without reasonable suspicion that a crime has been committed.

Lifesaver or harassment tool?

By Herbert L. White
Consolidated Media Group

CHARLOTTE — When Reggie Lawrence slides behind the wheel of his 1996 Nissan Pathfinder, strapping on a seat belt doesn't cross his mind.

Lawrence, a 25-year-old student at Johnson C. Smith University, prefers not to buckle up, a choice that is prevalent among African American men age 18-29. In a national telephone poll, 55.9 percent of black men in that age group don't buckle up.

"I think wearing a seat belt is an option," he said. "It's your life, and basically it should be up to you whether you want to wear it or not."

Conversely, black lawmakers are struggling with a painful dilemma.

African Americans suffer disproportionately from not wearing seat belts. But blacks are also likely to suffer disproportionately from a Clinton administration initiative to increase seat belt usage through state laws that permit police to stop motorists to check if they are wearing seat belts.

The split in the black community over the issue has stymied efforts to pass tougher seat belt laws in states with large urban and minority populations, where many complaints about police harassment originate. Yet some federal and state lawmakers contend that fears of police harassment are overblown. Surveys show that blacks, especially black men, drive beltless more often than their white or Hispanic counterparts, thereby exposing themselves to greater risks of fatal or critical injuries in vehicle crashes.

Some African Americans are leery that giving police more authority will make "driving while black" more annoying and dangerous. Although Lawrence, a native of Tampa, Fla., has never been stopped for a seat belt violation, several friends have. Florida, which is notorious for police profiling of minorities in an attempt to stem drug trafficking, has become a national example of law enforcement overstepping its authority.

"I know a lot of people that's happened to, especially back home," he said. "At home, it's what you drive. If you're 18 to 25

and driving a Lexus or a Jeep and it has rims and music, you're automatically considered a drug dealer, no matter what. If you're white and 18 to 25 and you're driving that, your parents are rich."

While seat belt laws are essentially state and local matters, President Clinton last year directed the Transportation Department to seek ways to increase seat belt usage from the current national average of 68 percent to 85 percent by 2000 and 90 percent by 2005, a rate the administration claims would save an estimated 10,000 lives a year. Fourteen states, including North Carolina, permit police to stop motorists to check if they are wearing their seat belts, and the Clinton initiative seeks to make that the law in every state. At least 15 states are considering passing such a law.

"There are virtually no African American males — including congressmen, actors, athletes and office workers — who have not been stopped at one time or another for an alleged traffic violation, namely driving while black," said Rep. John Conyers Jr. (D-Mich.), who supports tougher seat belt laws but does not want to let police officers stop people at will.

"It's just another way for the police to stop you for anything," Lawrence said. "If that passes, they can stop you for anything they want to, then they can search your car or anything they want. I don't think that's fair."

Last month, in response to concerns from Conyers and other lawmakers who say they are bombarded with complaints about unfair traffic stops, the House passed a bill that would require the Justice Department to conduct a two-year, nationwide study to determine whether blacks are being harassed through routine vehicle checks.

There is limited data indicating a problem — such as a 1995 Maryland state police study showing 73 percent of the cars subjected to stops and searches on Interstate 95 were driven by blacks, while only 14 percent of the people using the road were black. But the Justice study, estimated to cost \$500,000, would be the first comprehensive nationwide look at the issue.

Rep. Juanita Millender-

McDonald (D-Calif.) also questions the new seat belt laws, saying complaints about unfair or harassing traffic stops are common in her heavily Hispanic and African American district in south-central Los Angeles. California has permitted police checks for seat belt use since 1993.

"We are getting a lot of these, and they are very disturbing," she said of the complaints. "The young black males are saying: 'Why me? Why are we always being stopped for no apparent reason? Why are our cars being searched?' It has become an issue that we must look at, because these traffic stops are putting people in positions of anger, where they feel they have to respond because they think they are being stopped unfairly."

But Rep. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma, the lone black Republican and not a member of the Congressional Black Caucus, said he does not accept the notion that seat belt laws are being used to target minorities.

"The good of wearing seat belts far outweighs the bad," he said. "We have many states that have seat belt laws, but those laws are weak. They have no enforcement mechanism, which makes those laws a sham."

Clinton administration officials are aware of the concerns. National Highway Transportation Safety Administrator Ricardo Martinez has been working with black lawmakers on Capitol Hill and in state houses nationwide to allay any fears that seat belt laws might be used to abuse citizens, agency officials said.

Not only blacks have been concerned about the civil liberties issues raised by these laws. Efforts to pass tougher seat belt laws, in fact, failed in largely white states — such as Washington, Minnesota and Colorado — according to Janet Goss, spokeswoman for the Air Bag and Seat Belt Safety Campaign, a group funded by the nation's automakers and auto insurers.

"There is a strong feeling of individualism in those places; a strong feeling that government has no right to tell people what to do in their cars," Goss said.

And the anti-government-meddling syndrome can often be more difficult to overcome than "the

very real perceptions" of racism in law enforcement, she said.

David A. Harris, a law professor at the University of Toledo who has done several studies on the roles of race and ethnicity in police traffic stops, said there is compelling evidence that blacks are targeted by the police.

"Police for years have used traffic laws to stop people for reasons that really have nothing to do with traffic safety. The traffic codes are so voluminous, you can be pulled over for anything," Harris said.

"But as a policeman, you can't possibly stop everybody. You've got to be selective, and all of the available evidence we have is that police disproportionately use their power to stop blacks, Hispanics or other minorities whom they view as suspicious," Harris said.

The Maryland study, however, found that 70 percent of the searches of African Americans' cars turned up nothing.

Experts offer a variety of reasons for why many young blacks tend not to wear seat belts — that wearing belts is seen as unhip, that the high incidence of single-parent households leaves fewer role models, and that many poor families are forced to buy used cars in which seat belts may not be in good condition.

Centers for Disease Control research in which people were questioned about their seat belt usage indicates that tougher seat belt laws can make a difference. In telephone polls conducted between 1987 and 1993, only 44.1 percent of the black men aged 18 to 29 said they used seat belts. That compared with 54.3 percent of white men in the same age group, 65.4 percent of Hispanic men and 65.2 percent of Asian men.

A similar poll, conducted in 1995, found that in states with the tougher laws, the overall seat belt usage rate for young black men and women, ages 18 to 29, was 62.2 percent, with men at 58 percent and women at 65.6 percent. In the 36 states that had weaker seat belt laws, use rates fell to 46.1 percent for black men and 60 percent for black women.

The Washington Post contributed to this report.

UNCF

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Assistant U.S. Attorney Loretta Biggs, retired W-S State University professor Dr. Virginia K. Newell, the Rev. James Ferree and Vivian Love Turner.

The monies raised by The College Fund/UNCF provide financial aid to students, supplement faculty salaries, purchase teaching and laboratory equipment and defray other operating expenses.

The N.C. fundraising efforts (including the "Partners for the Future" Campaign) accumulated \$1.2 million. The College Fund/UNCF returned \$7.7 million to N.C. member schools.

One of the more popular fundraising sources is "The Lou Rawls Parade of Stars," which benefits the Fund. Over \$13 million was raised last year by the telethon to help reach the overall goal of \$75 million by the Fund.

North Carolina students make up six percent of the students who attend UNCF schools. Between 1991-1996, there were 564 students from W-S attended one of the 39 member schools and in Greensboro, 1,030 students who enrolled at that time.

"I think the member school give students a learning environ-

ment that is conducive to most of their needs," said Richards. "We take students from where they are to where they need to be."

According to Richards, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is looked at differently by member schools. "UNCF schools use the SAT to measure the strengths and weaknesses of a student so they know how to help them," said Richards. "The SAT is not used as an exclusionary standard to keep students out of college, who further explained."

With the year 2000 coming up, the goals and aspirations of the Fund continue to remain consistent.

"We hope to continue to increase our enrollment at our member schools and raise more funds via payroll deduction campaigns, corporate matching gift campaigns and increased individual giving," said Richards, who says it's important to also "increase and diversify our enrollment."

"We don't perpetuate segregation," said Richards. "We welcome any student and we always have."

Call 748-0010 for more information on applications and donation opportunities.

WOMAN

from page A1

didn't have to wear them. I had to find my niche, because I am a tomboy."

Treadwell found what she wanted in the Construction Training Program, said Richie Brooks development and housing director.

Martha Rooks agrees. Rooks said, "Todzia has come a long way. Now that she has applied herself, she has the potential to excel."

"When she first applied to the program, Treadwell recalls," she was a little difficult. She knew that she would have to learn a lot before she could do any work."

"Yeah, I gave them some trouble, I am just outspoken. I realized then, and I see now, that they were only looking out for my best interest. I had to be sure, I have my best interest at heart, too," she remarked with a snicker.

After two years with the program, Treadwell will be placed with the city or acquire a job with a private contractor.

Her work with this project landed Treadwell's name on the list for a Habitat Home and it has given her an opportunity for full-time permanent employment with the city.

She holds Denise Lucas in

high regards.

"Ms. Lucas is my girl, she inspired me to do my best. I look to her for advice," Treadwell said.

In regards to her future

"RISE gave me a foundation to grow from, it gave me vision."

— *Todzia Treadwell*

plans, Treadwell wants to continue her education, maybe in electrical work. She said, she recently bought a car to get to work and she is preparing for home ownership, too.

1200 Willie Davis Drive, now stands as testimony, of a young mother's faith and determination to create possibilities in light of profound obstacles.

Survey

from page A1

"All state senators and representatives, 308 legislative liaisons and lobbyists based in North Carolina and 28 capital news correspondents were asked to rate the 'effectiveness' of each member of the North Carolina General Assembly on a scale of 1 to 10," explained the summary that accompanied the report, which has been distributed around the state.

According to the Center for Public Policy Research, the survey's purpose "was to identify the most effective legislators in the General Assembly."

Ron Coble, the Center's executive director contends that the rankings "help citizens understand the way the legislature works — who's up who's down, who's new in town. He added, "This time, the rifts among House members caused shifts in effectiveness."

Critics, however reject the survey and describe it as nothing more than a popularity contest. Adams and Boyd-McIntyre criticized the rankings because they are based on legislators' assessment of each other and because lobbyists were also polled, not the representatives' constituents.

"It's a peer evaluation and I don't put too much stock in it," said Adams. "I don't think very many of the African-American

representatives even bothered to return the surveys."

Both Adams and Boyd-McIntyre deny that they are among the least effective members of the state House.

"I got some bills through, ratified," said Adams.

For example, there was the special provision in the budget bill that called for equity funding for the state's historically black colleges and universities. Initially, the Assembly had been poised to give an additional \$21 million to five schools deemed to have been underfunded. The state's black colleges were excluded from that list.

"That was another issue of race," said Adams.

The lawmaker from Greensboro said she led the push for equity.

"That was my bill. Sure there were other names on it, but that was my effort," said Adams.

One of the most contentious political issues of the moment is the debate over children's health care insurance. "Yet," notes Adams, "there are no African Americans on the conference committee, which is responsible for negotiating compromise between the disparate House and Senate versions of the proposed legislation."

A Klan rally — that's what it looks like down there," said Adams.

If black legislators are not appointed to key panels then it will be highly unlikely that they will have significant impact over the outcome, she explained.

Much of the Assembly's work is done through committees. Boyd-McIntyre noted that there are scores of committees, most with fewer than two dozen members. Consequently, she questions whether anyone other than the people on a specific committee can assess performance.

"My constituents know that I contribute," said Boyd-McIntyre, adding that she has received accolades and standing ovations on the House floor.

Boyd-McIntyre was responsible for new state laws regarding fire bombing of churches.

"I'm the one who was able to get the other legislators to do the right thing," said Boyd-McIntyre.

Yet, she was rated less effective than Rep. Steve Wood, R-Guilford, who has had problems within his own party.

Wood upstaged Rep. Robert Brawley's bid for speaker pro tem by nominating himself and garnering support from House Democrats. According to Adams, House Speaker Harold Brubaker "won't even go the the bathroom" as a means of keeping Wood from assuming leadership duties.

Wood fell 50 places in the

rankings, but at 82 he still was considered more effective than Adams, Boyd-McIntyre or Womble.

"I have the evidence to prove that I am doing my job," said Boyd-McIntyre. "The responsibility entrusted to me proves that I am not down there fumbling around."

Rep. Larry Womble could not be reached for comment.

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