**Excerpt from the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966**

An Act to provide for a coordinated national safety program and establishment of safety standards for motor vehicles in interstate commerce to reduce accidents involving motor vehicles and to reduce the deaths and injuries occurring in such accidents.

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-563, 80 Stat. 718) was enacted to reduce traffic accidents as well as the number of deaths and injuries to persons involved in traffic accidents. The act required regulators to establish federal motor vehicle safety standards to protect the public against "unreasonable risk of accidents occurring as a result of the design, construction or performance of motor vehicles" and also against "unreasonable risk of death or injury ... in the event accidents do occur."

**MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY ISSUES IN THE 1960S**

The act was motivated by a variety of factors. First and foremost, the public was growing increasingly concerned over the rising number of traffic fatalities on the nation's roads. Such fatalities had increased by nearly 30 percent between 1960 and 1965, and experts forecasted 100,000 such deaths annually by 1975 unless something was done to improve traffic safety. Adding fuel to the fire, Ralph Nader's *Unsafe at Any Speed*, published in November 1965, criticized the automobile industry for neglecting safety in favor of "power and styling" when designing new vehicles.

Nader's criticism was later substantiated during hearings held by the Senate Commerce Committee in which committee members reported "disturbing evidence of the automobile industry's chronic subordination of safe design to promotional styling, and of an overriding stress on power, acceleration, speed, and 'ride' to the relative neglect of safe performance or collision protection." Committee members remarked that new vehicle models had shown little improvement in safe design or in the incorporation of safety devices until industry had been subjected to the prod of heightened public interest and governmental concern. Members also noted that even basic safety design features such as safety door latches did not become standard equipment until ten years after their desirability and feasibility had been established. In short, Congress decided that the industry had been neglecting vehicle safety long enough, and in August 1966 both houses unanimously passed the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which was signed the following month by President...
PROVISIONS OF THE ACT

Administration of the act evolved considerably during its first several years. Initially, the act was to be administered by the Secretary of Commerce through a newly created National Traffic Safety Agency. In October 1966, however, when the Department of Transportation was created, Congress declared that the act would be carried out by the Secretary of Transportation through a National Traffic Safety Bureau. In June 1967, Executive Order 11357 terminated the National Traffic Safety Bureau and transferred its responsibilities to the National Highway Safety Bureau (NHSB). The NHSB was originally established as a National Highway Safety Agency by the Highway Safety Act of 1966 and renamed a "Bureau" by the Department of Transportation Act. In December 1970 the Highway Safety Act of 1970 established the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to succeed the NHSB in carrying out the safety programs developed under the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act.

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 gave regulators until January 31, 1967 to develop federal motor vehicle safety standards that were practical, stated in objective terms, and met the need for motor vehicle safety. In addition, the initial federal standards were required to be based on existing safety standards, such as those developed by the Society of Automotive Engineers. New and revised federal standards (that did not need to be based on existing standards) were required by January 31, 1968. Violators of the standards were subject to a $1,000 civil penalty for each offense, up to a maximum of $400,000 for a related series of violations (the maximum penalty was increased to $800,000 in 1974).

Regulators issued twenty standards for passenger cars by the initial deadline, including rules requiring installation of seat belts for all occupants, impact-absorbing steering columns, padded dashboards, safety glass, and dual braking systems. In time, federal motor vehicle safety standards have expanded to cover many other aspects of motor vehicle safety, including everything from windshield wipers, lights, and rearview mirrors to door locks, head restraints, and fuel tanks. In addition, federal motor vehicle safety standards have been developed for trucks, buses, trailers, and motorcycles.

AMENDMENT TO THE ACT IN 1974

In 1974 the act was amended to require manufacturers to remedy safety-related defects at no cost to consumers. Prior to the 1974 amendment, the act merely empowered the Secretary of Transportation to declare that a safety-related defect existed and to require that manufacturers notify the owners of the defective vehicles—the act did not require the manufacturers to fix the defect for free. In fact, a "repair at no cost" amendment had been considered as early as 1969, but was dropped when manufacturers promised Congress that all safety-related defects would be remedied at their expense, regardless of whether legislation required it. However, the industry broke its promise in 1971 and again in 1972, and so Congress responded by formally requiring manufacturers to fix all safety-related defects at no charge to consumers. A flurry of recalls took place in the years following the amendment, and the number of cars recalled for repair between 1977 and 1980 surpassed the number of new cars sold.
Although it is reasonable to conclude that the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 has improved traffic safety, it is difficult to estimate with certainty the precise impact of the act. Traffic fatalities and the fatality rate (measured in fatalities per million vehicle miles traveled) declined 17 percent and 71 percent, respectively, between 1967 and 2001. Undoubtedly, at least some of this improvement in traffic safety is due to the motor vehicle safety standards promulgated under the act. However, it is impossible to isolate the impact of these motor vehicle safety standards from the effects of changes in the myriad other factors that contribute to motor vehicle crashes, including changes in state laws governing speed limits, driver education, driver licensing, seat belt usage, drunk driving, and vehicle inspection as well as overall improvements in emergency response, medicine, highway design, and traffic control techniques.

See also: HIGHWAY SAFETY ACT OF 1966.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Security & Safety. Nuclear Security. Cybersecurity. Instead it was a series of breakthroughs -- from the battery to the electric motor -- in the 1800s that led to the first electric vehicle on the road. In the early part of the century, innovators in Hungary, the Netherlands and the United States -- including a blacksmith from Vermont -- began toying with the concept of a battery-powered vehicle and created some of the first small-scale electric cars. Electric cars didn’t have any of the issues associated with steam or gasoline. Fast forward to the late 1960s and early 1970s. Soaring oil prices and gasoline shortages -- peaking with the 1973 Arab Oil Embargo -- created a growing interest in lowering the U.S.’s dependence on foreign oil and finding homegrown sources of fuel. NHTSA has estimated that between 1960 and 2012, federal motor vehicle safety standards saved more than 600,000 lives, and the risk of a fatality declined by 56%. Although dozens of technologies were made subject to federal standards in the decades after federal regulation began, a NHTSA study reported that more than half of the lives saved—329,000—were from use of seat belts. While the federal standard was helpful in reducing fatalities, the study found that the passage of state laws allowing police to issue tickets if a driver or passengers are not wearing seat belts caused the number of live In 1960, car buyers were demanding smaller vehicles. Compact cars were marketed heavily by every automobile manufacturer, in stark contrast to the 1950s. New models included the Ford Falcon, the Chevrolet Corvair and the Plymouth Valiant. Safety was the primary concern in 1966 as the industry chalked up its second best sales year ever, topped only by 1965. But with a nationwide death toll of about 1,000 road deaths per week, everyone’s focus was on safety. Due to domestic production issues, auto imports set a new record in 1967 with 785,000 sold. Overall sales lagged behind 1966, with no help from the Vietnam War, which literally pulled hundreds of thousands of young men out of the market. Prices rose markedly because of higher production costs and wages.