# Buckle up, it’s not that hard

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The government collected millions of pesos in fines from seatbelt violators last year—proof, per the Land Transportation Office (LTO), that it was strictly implementing the law.

Indeed, P179.9 million netted from 134,147 motorists apprehended nationwide for violating Republic Act No. 8750, or the Seat Belts Use Act of 1999, is no chump change, especially at a time when the government needs every revenue source it can tap.

Of the number, 124,712 have already settled the penalties, 53 were contesting the violation, and the rest still have to settle the fines. LTO data showed that Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, and Quezon) had the most number of apprehended seatbelt law violators with 32,485, followed by Central Luzon with 10,774, and Central Visayas, 10,270.

The LTO can chalk this up as an achievement, but the figures also prove that a substantial number of motorists continue to ignore the law.

## Most violated traffic law

In a 2018 article, Vera Files, quoting an LTO official, stated that RA 8750 was the “most violated traffic law in the land.”

Five years since that article was published and the problem has apparently remained—last year, the United Nations said only 52 percent of drivers in the Philippines wear seatbelts. If this figure checks out, it implies that the LTO is apprehending only a fraction of the violators.

What’s interesting, as motoring site Top Gear Philippines pointed out, is the marked decrease in seatbelt users from 79.7 percent in 2013. This is also alarming considering that wearing a seatbelt is a simple and basic act, and is the most effective way to prevent injury or death in crashes. As the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised: “Use a seatbelt during every trip, no matter how short.”

But how exactly does a seatbelt help? Wearing a seatbelt reduces the impact of a crash by minimizing localized injury because it spreads the forces over the body’s stronger areas, like the chest, hips, and shoulders. Seatbelts also help keep the driver and passengers inside the vehicle and reduce the risk of fatal injuries that could occur when one is thrown from the car. More modern seatbelts also have safety features such as pre-tensioners, which tighten the belt upon detecting the crash.

## Mere decorations

“Unfortunately, despite the benefits and undeniable presence of seatbelts in every car, the law remains one of the most violated rules in the country,” the information site LTOPortal.Ph stated.

“Maybe it’s intentional defiance or ignorance of the law, but the fact remains that seatbelts are usually relegated as mere decorations in the car, especially in the Philippines,” it added.

RA 8750 requires the driver and front seat passengers of public or private motor vehicles to wear a seatbelt at all times. Failure to do so can cost violators up to P1,000 for the first offense, P2,000 for the second violation, and P5,000 plus license suspension for succeeding infractions.

A stipulation in the law that many motorists appear to not be aware of is the requirement for all car occupants, front and rear seat passengers alike, to wear a seatbelt.

LTOPortal.Ph further noted that the law “remains ineffective” despite it being in existence for over two decades. “Buckling up just never stuck with Filipinos,” it said.

“Many motorists just do not know what the law is about. Some people also don’t seem to realize the dangers of not wearing a seatbelt as it is quite uncomfortable and it limits their movement in the car. Unfortunately, ignorance of the law is not an excuse,” it added.

## Neglected public health issue

LTO has vowed that it will implement the law more strictly by “embarking on an aggressive campaign,” referring to the agency’s Stop Road Crash program. LTO chief Vigor D. Mendoza II said the campaign will be complemented by an “equally aggressive information drive” to encourage more motorists to use seatbelts. It intends to coordinate with local government units and tap the services of citizen groups and community organizations to help promote public safety awareness.

It must also take the lead in ensuring that vehicles, especially public utility vehicles, have functioning seatbelts in the first place.

According to the Department of Health, an average of 12,000 Filipinos die in car crashes every year. In addition, Philippine Statistics Authority data showed that road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death among those 15-29 years old and a major killer among children. This should be enough to encourage more Filipinos to buckle up. As Dr. Rui Paulo de Jesus, World Health Organization representative to the Philippines, said: “Road traffic injuries are a major yet often neglected public health issue. Deaths and injuries from road crashes are preventable.”

It takes very minimal effort to put on a seatbelt but it could cost an arm and a leg, literally and figuratively, without wearing one.