

TOWING TROUBLES: Danger on America's Roads

2006 Results and Findings of 2ND Annual Towing Safety Research Study

In year two of Master Lock's Annual Towing Troubles safety research study, the company sought to look beyond the fact that Americans aren't towing safely – which was proven in year one – and look at the reasons why. How much do they think they know about safe towing, and how much do they really know? Where did they learn how to hook up the trailer or camper? From Dad or Uncle Fred? A neighbor? What kind of information was provided by the dealer or salesman? If they bought a used trailer, where else would they go to find out how to tow it properly and safely?

Exploring these questions allowed Master Lock to layer the results on top of their existing research to form an even more in-depth picture of the issue of towing safety. The research was conducted among U.S. owners of trailered boats and small vehicles in June, 2006. For the purpose of the study, small vehicle refers to ATVs, motorcycles, jet skis and snowmobiles.

Who Tows?

- A broad group of Americans -- 47 percent of respondents were aged 18 – 54; 53 percent were 55 and up
- Men outnumbered women two to one, with 63 percent vs. 37 percent
- 72 percent live in the Midwest or South; 11 percent were located in the East and 17% in the West
- Income was nearly evenly divided with 30 percent under \$50,000; 36 percent between \$50,000 and \$100,000 and 21 percent over \$100,000
- While 76 percent tow a boat, many owned multiple items and trailers: 67 percent tow ATVs, 33 percent tow motorcycles, 21 percent tow a jet ski and 15 percent tow a snowmobile

What Don't They Know?

- The majority (57%) did not know or were uncertain of their Gross Trailer Weight, crucial to selecting the proper towing system components, such as class of trailer hitch, and ensuring the correct tow vehicle type to pull the trailer
- Over half (54%) did not know or were uncertain of their class of trailer hitch
- The vast majority (71%) admitted to being only somewhat to not knowledgeable about proper towing practices and safety
 - Nearly 1/3 of trailer owners (29%) admitted to having limited or no knowledge at all
 - Less than one in three (29%) believed that they were very knowledgeable

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Where Do They Go For Information?

- A shocking three quarters (75%) admitted that a main source for information on towing practices and safety was simply past experience with a trailer, in other words trial and error. Guessing is absolutely not the best or safest way to learn proper towing practices.
- Only one quarter turned to the trailer owner's manual (24%) and less than half (45%) sought out others (friends or relatives)
- Barely one in 10 (13%) received towing information from either the boat dealer or trailer dealer – professionals who would be an expected information source
- Interestingly, boat owners were less likely to receive information from their boat or trailer dealer than owners of small vehicles, although boats are larger, heavier and towed by more people
- Boat owners were more likely to get information from magazines (9% vs. 5%) but less likely from TV (3% vs. 8%)
- Perhaps not surprisingly, men were much less likely than women to ask for help from friends or relatives (34% vs. 67%)
- More than eight in 10 (85%) men cited past experience with trailers as a main source of information on towing practices and safety, again, trial and error is not the best way to learn proper and safe towing procedures

They Think They Know!

- Although less than one third (29%) of trailer owners feel they are very knowledgeable, nearly two thirds or 63 percent said they did not need any further information. This troubling disconnect reveals a significant lack of understanding of the risks of unsafe towing.
 - Very few trailer owners sought further information on key safety issues, perhaps mistakenly believing they were already towing safely (yet 2005 research shows they are not!)
 - Only one in 10 owners was interested in additional information on weight distribution (13%) which affects the levelness of the trailer and driver control of the tow vehicle; or tire safety (11%) -- worn, under-inflated and dry-rotted tires can blow under highway conditions, leading to dangerous accidents.
 - Again, only one in 10 owners was interested in trailer/brake lights (11%) which means that brake lights, turn signals and reverse lights may not work properly. Additionally, frayed and exposed wires pose a significant danger.
 - Even fewer, only one in twenty, wanted information about key safety issues including leveling the trailer (5%), choosing the right size hitch ball or ball mount (5% each), or properly fastening the coupler to the hitch ball (5%). An unlevelled trailer will reduce the driver's control of the vehicle and may cause the trailer and consequently the vehicle to fishtail.
 - Use of safety chains, vehicle requirements, locking the trailer and securing cargo – also key safety issues – also received little interest from trailer owners. Properly crossed safety chains form a cradle to catch a trailer if it becomes unhitched and prevent it from falling onto the road where it can cause severe vehicle and trailer damage as well as accidents and injuries. 2005 research showed that less than half (47%) properly cross their safety chains
 - Towing more than one trailer or different weights can make it difficult to keep the trailer level and many respondents owned more than one boat or towed item. Yet only 5 percent were interested in more information on leveling – one of the most critical elements of safe towing.
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Are Professionals Helping or Hurting?

- 40 percent of respondents purchased their trailer from a retail outlet or dealer; 53 percent purchased from another individual
- Of that 40 percent of owners who bought their trailer from a retail outlet or dealer, only half were instructed on key safety practices such as:
 - Proper use of safety chains (57%)
 - Fastening the trailer to the hitch ball (55%)
 - Trailer/brake lights (49%)
 - Weight distribution (49%)
 - Securing cargo (47%)
 - Tire safety (46%)
- This means that barely 20 percent of the total trailer owners received any professional instruction in these proper towing and safety procedures
- Only one in three retail purchasers (32%) or 13 percent of total trailer owners received professional instruction in leveling a trailer, one of the most important safety issues
- Even in outfitting the new trailer with towing system components, few retailers or dealers provided any information on proper selection:
 - Just over one third (42%) of retail/dealer purchasers, or 17 percent of total owners, received professional instruction on choosing the right size hitch ball
 - 39 percent of retail/dealer purchasers or 16 percent of total owners received information on vehicle requirements for trailer load
 - 35 percent of retail/dealer purchasers or 14 percent of total owners received information on choosing a ball mount
- Nearly a third of retail purchasers (31%) were told nothing about towing practices and safety issues

What About Trailer Security?

- Most owners have also never received any professional information regarding trailer security, or how to protect their purchase after they leave the retailer/dealer.
 - Less than half of retail/dealer purchasers (47%) or 19 percent of total owners have been told how to lock the trailer when hitched
 - Even fewer, only 43 percent of purchasers or 17 percent of total owners have been instructed on how to lock the trailer when unhitched. An unlocked trailer can easily be re-hitched to a thief's vehicle and towed away, never to be seen again

What are the Risks?

- More than one in five trailer owners (21%) have experienced a safety incident, from fishtailing, loss of control and tire blow outs to a trailer that came loose or loss of cargo
- While a smaller number suffered an accident or wreck, of those, 11 percent resulted in injuries and the majority (56%) sustained damage to the vehicle and or trailer
- One third of those who experienced an accident felt it could have been avoided if they were more aware of safe towing practices
- Nearly 10 percent of owners experienced a theft or attempted theft of items on the trailer or the entire trailer and cargo. Expanded knowledge of trailer and cargo security can prevent theft of the trailer and make cargo that much more secure, yet few owners were interested in information about locking the trailer when unhitched (7%), locking when hitched (5%) or securing cargo (6%)

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Total qualified respondents = 316, aged 18 or older, who own and tow either a boat (158) or small vehicle (snowmobile, ATV, jet ski, motorcycle) (158)

(Summary of 2005 Towing Troubles survey results on following page.)

Summary Review of 2005 Towing Troubles Survey Results

What Are They Towing?

- Most Americans tow using a pickup (57%) or a sports utility vehicle (31%)
- Some 10 percent of respondents were towing with a vehicle that was ranked only moderately or poorly appropriate for the class of trailer they were towing while 10 percent did not have the most appropriate towing vehicle for the type of trailer they were towing
- A majority (80%) use Class III trailer hitches

Where Are They Going?

- More than one-quarter of respondents (28%) traveled between 50 and 100 miles, while nearly half (47%) traveled more than 100 miles to their destination towing a trailer

Their Negligence is Showing

- A majority (51%) of Americans who tow do not use the recommended security methods of a locking device for their coupler and hitch
- Nearly 50 percent (48%) of respondents towing boats use only a non-locking receiver pin to connect their trailer, which is susceptible to tampering
- Respondents towing campers had the best approach to safety, with 69 percent using both locks and pins to secure their vehicles, 69 percent using weight distribution systems, 71 percent using appropriately crossed security chains and 52 percent having a properly leveled trailer
- Nearly 50 percent (47%) of those towing boats didn't properly cross their safety chains under the coupler.
- A majority of respondents towing boats or ATVs/jet skis/motorcycles achieved a moderate or worse ranking on the levelness of their trailer. For ATVs/jet skis/motorcycles, 15 percent were ranked poor or extremely poor
- More than 50 percent (53%) of towing vehicles and trailers received only moderate or poor rankings on their electrical systems. Boat trailers presented the greatest danger, with 17 percent of their electrical systems in poor or extremely poor condition
- Trailer tires are one of the biggest dangers on the road, with 41 percent of tires in only moderate or worse condition. Some 10 percent of boat trailers had tires in poor or extremely poor condition.

Their Cargo is Overflowing

- Security of cargo on the trailers also is an issue, with more than 54 percent of campers, 28 percent of ATVs/jet skis/motorcycles and 49 percent of boats ranking as moderate or worse in their cargo security
- The security of additional cargo – loaded in the boats or campers – was a significant issue, with 32 percent of respondents ranking moderate and 40 percent ranking poor or extremely poor. This means coolers, lawn chairs, bicycles, and other typical cargo could easily fall into the path of an oncoming car
- The condition of bungee cords was a major issue – 46 percent were in moderate or poor condition and improperly located – meaning cords could easily snap or come unhooked and release cargo onto the roadway
- Ratchet tie-downs were a problem for 39 percent of respondents, as those towing boats or ATVs/jet skis/motorcycles received moderate or worse marks for the condition and location of the tie-downs securing their cargo