

Number of children left 'baking' in cars underreported

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A growing number of children are dying or being injured after being left alone in a hot car, and children's advocates say not enough is being done to prevent such deaths, which the government doesn't even track.

Jan Null, a meteorologist and independent researcher in San Francisco, counted 214 cases of heat-related deaths from 1998 through July 31 of children who were left in cars. Last year, he says, there were 42 cases, up from 25 in 1999.

"These parents are baking their children," says Null, who compiled the data from news reports. Most of the children were 2 months to 5 years old.

Carmaker General Motors and the National SAFE KIDS Campaign have identified at least 175 heat-related deaths in cars since 1996.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in a report in May, identified 116 deaths and 39 injuries in children 9 and younger from 1998-2002, the most recent year for which data are available. It examined death certificates and news reports.

But a July 2002 report by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said reports may "undercount the true number of fatal cases nationally" because data are limited or incomplete. It tracks injuries and deaths of children left unattended around motor vehicles but does not single out deaths by overheating.

One common misconception is that children are in danger only when it's hot outside. But Null points to the first death this year, in Roseburg, Ore., where the temperature outside was 68 degrees.

Within an hour of being exposed to extreme heat, a child can go into shock from a lack of fluids or even have seizures, says physician Martin Yudovich of Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. He says car heat affects a child three times faster than it can an adult.

Sometimes parents are simply busy and forgetful, says Janette Fennell, president of the advocacy group Kids and Cars. "These are not bad people," she says, but more needs to be done to educate parents. Her group recommends the development of alarms for car seats that would warn a parent that a child is still strapped in. It's also pushing for the traffic safety agency to document cases and make recommendations for improving child safety.

Deaths this year — 19 so far — have occurred from Oregon to New Jersey and south to Florida. Punishment for caretakers varies from state to state. Nine (California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington) have statutory provisions making it illegal to leave a child in a car, and two others, Kentucky and Missouri, have laws that apply only if a child dies, according to Kids and Cars.

Caretakers still could face prosecution, even in states without specific laws. Last summer, a Tucson couple faced felony child-abuse charges when police say they left their 4-month-

old son in the car while having dinner at a restaurant. Another Tucson mother whose child died was booked on similar charges a month earlier.

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