

Oklahoma ranks high in heatstroke deaths of children left in vehicles

Oklahoma is No. 9 in per capita child vehicular heatstroke, with at least 19 deaths since 1997.

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Prevent tragedy: Child heatstroke deaths in vehicles

- "Look before you lock" : Get in the habit of always opening the back door of your vehicle every time you reach your destination to make sure no child has been left behind.
- Keep a large stuffed animal in the child's car seat when it's not occupied. When the child is placed in the seat, put the stuffed animal in the front passenger seat as a visual reminder your child is in the back safety seat.
- Put something you'll need like your cell phone, handbag, employee ID or brief case, etc., on the floor board in the back seat.
- Make arrangements with your child's daycare center or babysitter that you will always call if your child will not be there on a particular day as scheduled. Ask them to phone you if your child doesn't show up when expected.
- When a child is missing, always check the pool first. Then check the vehicle, including the trunk.
- Keep vehicles locked at all times, even in the garage or driveway.

—KidsandCars.org, GoldenGateWeatherServices

[Find more information about child death due to vehicular heatstroke](#)

[Jan Null's website Golden Gate Weather Services](#)

On average more than 35 children die each year from heatstroke suffered in vehicles, and the nightmare is only becoming more widespread.

"The absolute worst thing that any parent can do is to think that this can't happen to them," said Amber Rollins, director of [KidsandCars.org](#), an advocacy and education nonprofit.

Oklahoma is one of the states where the tragedies are most prevalent, with at least 19 child deaths due to vehicular heatstroke since 1997, [KidsandCars.org](#) data show. The state ranks 12th highest in total child vehicular heatstroke deaths, Rollins said.

Analysis of deaths per capita ranks Oklahoma No. 9 in prevalence of child vehicular heatstroke deaths, according to data compiled by Jan Null, a San Francisco-based meteorologist. Null began conducting key research on temperature change in enclosed vehicles after the 2001 vehicular heatstroke death of a California infant.

Leaving a child in a car, even on a cool day, is deadly because the temperature inside a vehicle and a child's core body temperature both increase quickly.

A body temperature of 107 degrees or higher can be lethal because at that temperature human cells are damaged and internal organs begin to shut down.

"Many people think it won't happen to them, and we thought the same thing," said the mother of an Oklahoma infant who died of vehicular heatstroke. The woman spoke with the Tulsa World on the condition of anonymity. "No matter how responsible, organized, or professional you are, it can happen."

Child vehicular heatstroke became recognized as a public safety issue in the mid-to-late 1990s, Rollins said. At that point it had become standard for children to ride in the back seat of vehicles to prevent child death caused by the deployment of passenger-side airbags.

"As soon as kids started riding in the back seat, airbag deaths stopped and heatstroke deaths skyrocketed," Rollins said.

At least 619 children died of vehicular heatstroke nationwide between 1998 and the end of June, Null's data show.

Nationwide an average of nine children die during both July and August, historically the most deadly months.

"It's important to put it in context how big a problem it is," Null said. "It's not just the random case you may hear about."

Null's analysis of circumstances surrounding deaths shows that children were unknowingly left in vehicles in 52 percent of cases that occurred between 1998 and 2013. In 29 percent of cases, a child died after letting themselves inside an unattended vehicle.

In 18 percent of cases, a child was intentionally left in a vehicle by an adult, although "not necessarily to do harm, we hope," Null said.

A change in a family's routine is often involved in cases where children are unknowingly left in vehicles, Rollins said. Examples include a different parent than usual being responsible for dropping a child off at daycare, or a schedule change in daily drop-off order for families with multiple children.

"The smallest thing can throw you off track and send you on autopilot," Rollins said.

Both Rollins and the Oklahoma mother believe vehicles should be equipped with an alarm that would alert drivers if a child is left in a vehicle.

“My hope is one day car manufacturers are mandated for a sensor alarm for a car seat with a baby,” the mother said.

“They have all sorts of sensors for low tires, keys, seat belts, even backup cameras. Why not for the life of a baby? The public had no choice when it was mandated to place babies in the back seat due to safety issues being in the front. What a sad trade of trying to keep a baby safe from the front seat to a potential death trap in the back seat.”

The technology exists, but nothing has happened because the U.S. Department of Transportation feels, along with automakers, that the solution to child vehicular heatstroke deaths is education and awareness, Rollins said.

However, history shows that education and awareness alone are never enough to prevent tragedies because human beings are imperfect by nature, Rollins said. She believes people need safeguards.

“Our brains are not wired to keep up with everything that’s going on,” Rollins said. “Especially with experiences new parents face.”

The Oklahoma mother asks people to please have empathy.

“The parent or caregiver who inadvertently leaves a child in a hot car lives with that pain for the rest of their lives,” she said. “It never goes away. The person who accidently leaves a child in a car can be prosecuted, but no amount of punishment, fines, or community service will bring the child back nor unlock the self-imposed punishment the person lives with for the rest of their lives.”

Child Heatstroke Deaths in Vehicles

Year	U.S. Deaths
2009	33
2010	49
2011	33
2012	34
2013	44
2014*	13

*Through June 30

Source: *Golden Gate Weather Services*

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http://www.tulsaworld.com/news/health/oklahoma-ranks-high-in-heatstroke-deaths-of-children-left-in/article_06bbaec3-0b0b-566e-b2ec-6708dafab156.html