

Laura Achee

From: Laura Achee
Sent: Friday, February 27, 2026 10:22 AM
To: Senate Transportation Committee
Subject: Question from STRA Feb 26 SB 239 hearing on seatbelts in imported vehicles

From: Heath Hilyard <Heath.Hilyard@akleg.gov>
Sent: Friday, February 27, 2026 10:09 AM
To: Laura Achee <Laura.Achee@akleg.gov>
Subject: RE: question from STRA Feb 26 meeting

Does the federal exemption for legally imported vehicles also include an exemption from seatbelt requirements?

Yes, the federal 25-year exemption does exempt the vehicle from federal seatbelt requirements for the purpose of legal importation.

Under the Imported Vehicle Safety Compliance Act of 1988, any motor vehicle that is at least 25 years old (calculated from the specific month and year of manufacture) is exempt from all [Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards \(FMVSS\)](#). This includes standards for seatbelt assemblies, airbags, and crashworthiness.

However, there is a major distinction between importing the car and driving it on public roads:

1. Federal Importation (NHTSA/DOT)

When you fill out the required [HS-7 Declaration Form](#) at the port of entry, you check Box 1. This declares the vehicle is 25 years or older and therefore does not need to comply with U.S. safety standards. At this stage, the federal government does not require you to retrofit the car with seatbelts if it didn't come with them originally.

2. State Registration and Use

While the federal government lets the car into the country, state laws govern whether you can actually drive it on the road.

- **Safety Inspections:** Most states require a safety inspection before registration. If your state requires all road-legal vehicles to have seatbelts, you may be forced to install them to pass.
- **Vintage/Antique Plates:** Many states offer "Antique" or "Classic" plates that have more lenient equipment requirements for older vehicles, often exempting them from modern safety features if the car was not originally equipped with them.
- **Seatbelt Use Laws:** Regardless of the car's age, almost all states (except New Hampshire) require passengers to use seatbelts if they are present.

What percentage of legally imported vehicles into the US do not have seatbelts?

There is no official government percentage for how many legally imported 25-year-old vehicles lack seatbelts. This is primarily because federal agencies like the [NHTSA](#) track compliance eligibility rather than specific equipment tallies for exempt vehicles.

However, we can estimate the likelihood based on global manufacturing trends and the specific nature of the "25-year rule":

1. The Statistical "Invisible" Group

Because vehicles 25 years or older are [exempt from all Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards \(FMVSS\)](#), they do not undergo the standard safety inspections that would record the presence of seatbelts at the federal level.

- Original Equipment: Most cars imported under this rule today (manufactured in the late 1990s and early 2000s) come from markets like Japan or Europe, where front seatbelts have been standard for decades.
- The Rare Exception: The vehicles most likely to lack seatbelts are "true" vintage imports (pre-1968) or specialized utility vehicles from developing markets.

2. Why the Number is Likely Very Low

- Global Standards: By 2001 (25 years ago from 2026), almost every major car-producing nation had mandated front seatbelts for decades. For example, Japan mandated front seatbelts in 1969.
- The "Gray Market" History: In the 1980s, before the 25-year rule was fully established, studies suggested that up to [60% of "gray market" imports](#) were non-compliant with U.S. safety standards. However, "non-compliant" usually meant the belts didn't meet *specific* U.S. tension or labeling requirements, not that they were missing entirely.

3. State-Level "Self-Correction"

Even if a vehicle is imported legally without belts, owners often install them to meet State Registration requirements.

- In many states, while you can *import* the car without belts, you cannot pass a state safety inspection to get a license plate unless they are retrofitted.
- Liability: Insurance companies often require seatbelts for [classic car policies](#), further incentivizing owners to add them even if the law doesn't strictly demand it.

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