

Preventing deaths of children in hot cars through better messaging

September 20 2017, by Jessica Luton

Each year, dozens of young children die after being locked in a hot car, but new research from the University of Georgia's department of geography shows that most parents don't believe it could happen to them.

Their findings, published recently in the journal *Injury Prevention*, could help improve public health [messaging](#) and prevent more deaths.

Department of geography doctoral student Castle Williams and professor Andrew Grundstein interviewed [parents](#) and caregivers as well as experts in meteorology, epidemiology, psychology and child injury about the topic. The results show significant differences in the ways in which parents and experts understood and received information about the dangers of hot cars.

Overall the study shows that a parent's own ability to acknowledge their likelihood of accidentally forgetting a child in a hot car is an important factor in improving public health messaging and preventing deaths in the future.

"This work is extremely important to everyday moms and dads because it can hopefully convince other parents or caregivers that they too are vulnerable to this tragedy," said Williams. "Until we can convince parents that this can happen to anyone, we are going to continue to see case after case of children being forgotten in hot cars."

The research also showed that, unlike the experts, parents often thought

that these incidents happened as a result of intentional behavior by a parent or caretaker or that lifestyle factors, such as low income, increased an individual's likelihood of forgetting a child in a car.

In July 2017 alone, 11 children in the U.S. died in cars as a result of vehicular heatstroke. Understanding how different populations-including pediatricians, parents and public health experts-receive information increases the likelihood of preventing deaths through more effective public health messaging.

"These research findings are significant for any individuals who create public health messaging to better inform the public at large," said Williams. "While experts have insisted that parents don't believe they can forget their children in hot cars, until this study there has not been any data to prove it. Further, with the majority of these hot car deaths being accidental and not intentional, this study helps us better understand why parents do not feel vulnerable, and ways in which public health messaging can engage, reach and increase caregivers' vulnerability to reduce the number of incidents that occur each year."

Future health messaging, said Williams, must strive to engage and reach all parents or caregivers using a multifaceted messaging strategy. Tactics such as personalized messaging, providing additional resources to news media, strengthening the relationships between [public health officials](#) and journalists and ramping up messaging just before or during heat and temperature increases can all be effective strategies for improving messaging.

"I urge parents and caregivers, practitioners, pediatricians and day care providers to examine the results of my study and potentially implement some of the communication and behavioral suggestions that I recommend," said Williams. "It is my hope that [health](#) practitioners and organizations that create and distribute risk information on this topic

realize that there is a difference in the way they believe parents and [caregivers](#) obtain information and how they actually receive information about this issue."

More information: Castle A Williams et al. Children forgotten in hot cars: a mental models approach for improving public health messaging, *Injury Prevention* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/injuryprev-2016-042261](https://doi.org/10.1136/injuryprev-2016-042261)

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