

2020 TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE INDEX

INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global pandemic. In the United States, many states and localities responded by prohibiting large-scale gatherings, issuing stay-at-home orders, and closing various facilities. Consequently, exceptional conditions were observed on roadways in 2020—an historical drop in vehicle miles traveled due to travel and other restrictions imposed by national, state, and local authorities, accompanied by a disconcerting and unexpected increase in motor vehicle fatalities. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration identified unsafe driving behaviors, including non-use of seat belts, impaired driving, and speeding as main contributors to the increase in traffic fatalities.

For more than a decade, the annual *Traffic Safety Culture Index* (TSCI) survey has contributed to our understanding of America's traffic safety culture. Responses from the 2020 TSCI also can provide insights on the changes in public perceptions, attitudes toward, and engagement in unsafe driving behaviors during the pandemic relative to pre-pandemic years.

KEY FINDINGS

Distracted Driving

- More respondents view reading (94.9%) or typing (95.5%) a text/email on a hand-held cell phone while driving as extremely or very dangerous, compared with holding and talking on a hand-held cell phone (79.7%). However, only 20% perceive using technology that allows hands-free use of their phones, such as Bluetooth or CarPlay, while driving to be extremely or very dangerous.
- More respondents believe drivers risk being caught by the police for using a hand-held cell phone for talking (42.0%) or typing a text/email (43.0%) than they do for reading a text/email (31.8%).
- Nearly all respondents believed that people who were important to them would disapprove of typing or sending a text/email on a hand-held cell phone while driving.
- Nevertheless, about a quarter of drivers (22.7%) report having driven while typing or sending a text/email on a hand-held cell phone at least once in the past 30 days. More respondents report having engaged in distracted driving by talking (37.2%) and reading (33.9%) on a hand-held cell phone while driving.
- Over 80% of respondents support a law against talking on a hand-held cell phone while driving for all drivers, while less than half respondents (45.9%) support a law against using hands-free technology to read, type, or send a text or email while driving.

[VIEW REPORT](#)

ABOUT

Founded in 1947, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and educational organization dedicated to saving lives by preventing traffic crashes and reducing injuries when crashes occur. Funding for this research was provided by voluntary contributions from AAA/CAA and their affiliated motor clubs, individual members, AAA-affiliated insurance companies, and other organizations or sources.

MORE INFORMATION

AAAFoundation.org

AAA FOUNDATION FOR
TRAFFIC SAFETY
607 14th Street, NW, Suite 201
Washington, DC 20005
202-638-5944



Aggressive Driving

- More than half of respondents (52.3%) indicate that speeding on a freeway is extremely or very dangerous; roughly 85% of respondents perceive driving through a red light as extremely or very dangerous.
- About 60% of respondents felt that the police would catch a driver for traveling 15 mph over the speed limit on a freeway, yet 45.2% reported having done so in the past 30 days.
- Fewer than 50% of respondents support a law for using cameras to automatically ticket drivers who drive more than 10 mph over speed limits on residential streets.

Drowsy Driving

- Roughly 95% of respondents identify drowsy driving as very or extremely dangerous. About 33% thought drowsy drivers risked being caught by the police.
- Nearly all respondents (98.1%) believed that people who were important to them would disapprove of drowsy driving.
- Despite high rates of respondents' perceived danger and social disapproval regarding drowsy driving, 17.3% of them admit to having driven while being so tired that they had had a hard time keeping their eyes open at least once in the past 30 days.

Impaired Driving

- Most drivers (94.5%) perceive driving after drinking as very or extremely dangerous; 6% admitted to having done so in the past 30 days.
- Nearly 70% of respondents consider driving within an hour after using marijuana to be very or extremely dangerous, while 93.7% socially disapprove of doing so.
- Most drivers (87.0%) indicate driving after using potentially impairing prescription drugs as very or extremely dangerous. Over 40% consider that people driving after using potentially impairing prescription drugs would be likely to be caught by the police.

Traffic Safety Culture Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Comparing 2020 results with those from 2018 and 2019, overall:

- No significant changes in drivers' perceived danger were found for all unsafe driving behaviors examined in this survey.
- With regard to perceived risk of apprehension, however, significant positive changes were found among some

unsafe driving behaviors such as driving while talking or reading on a hand-held cell phone.

- Additionally, respondents were more likely to believe that people who are important to them would disapprove of most unsafe driving behaviors; respondents were less likely to engage in most unsafe driving behaviors as well.
- However, fewer respondents were supportive of most of the included safety countermeasures.

The following summarizes notable changes specific to some unsafe driving behaviors:

- Between 2018 and 2020, consistently more people socially disapproved of driving while talking on a hand-held cell phone from one year to the next. Additionally, there were significant reductions in engagement with all types of distracted driving (i.e., talking, reading, and manually typing on a hand-held cell phone while driving).
- Respondents are more likely to socially disapprove of speeding on a freeway in 2020 compared with 2018 and 2019; however, there has been little change in self-reported engagement in speeding on freeways.
- Consistently over the past three years, significant reductions were found in self-reported engagement in drowsy driving.

In 2020, 77% of respondents support laws making it illegal to drive with a certain amount of marijuana. This proportion, however, significantly decreased compared with 2019 (84%) and 2018 (82%).

METHODOLOGY

The 2020 TSCI includes a sample of 2,889 U.S. licensed drivers ages 16 or older who completed the online survey and reported having driven at least once in the past 30 days before the survey. Survey participants were asked questions regarding perceived danger, risk of apprehension, social approval of dangerous driving, and support for laws and policies designed to curtail these behaviors, as well as self-reported engagement in these behaviors. Data from the 2020 TSCI were collected between Oct. 23 and Nov. 23, 2020, using a probability-based sampling panel representative of the U.S. population.

REFERENCE

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. (2021). *2020 Traffic Safety Culture Index* (Technical Report). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.