

American Driving Survey, 2020–2021

October 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on many aspects of American life, including but not limited to travel. A combination of changes in employment, remote work, stay-at-home orders, and people voluntarily foregoing travel due to health concerns all resulted in a large decrease in the amount that Americans drove in 2020 relative to prior years (Tefft et al., 2021). While the pandemic continued throughout 2021, many of the measures taken in 2020 to combat it were relaxed and travel began to approach pre-pandemic levels. This Research Brief provides highlights from the AAA Foundation's 2020 & 2021 American Driving Survey, which quantifies the daily driving of the United States population. Results show that 93.8% of U.S. residents ages 16 years and older drove at least occasionally in 2021, unchanged from 2020. Drivers reported making an average of 2.57 driving trips, spending 61.3 minutes behind the wheel, and driving 32.7 miles each day in 2021. Projecting these results to all drivers nationwide, 245 million drivers made a total of 229 billion driving trips, spent 91 billion hours driving, and drove 2.92 trillion miles in 2021, all of which represented increases relative to 2020. This Research Brief presents additional statistics regarding the driving of the American public in 2020 and 2021, with discussion of possible implications for traffic safety.

Method

The methodology of the American Driving Survey is described in detail in a previous report (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2021) and is summarized here. Members of a pre-recruited research panel were invited to participate in an online or telephone interview in which they were asked to report basic information about all of the travel that they did on the day before the interview. Approximately 5,100 participants were interviewed each year, with interviews spread approximately evenly over all days of the year. The survey was administered in English and in Spanish, primarily online but also by telephone to accommodate participants who lack internet access or are more comfortable participating by phone. Panel members who did not respond to the initial invitation to participate were reminded a total of four times over a 20-day period from the initial invitation. Completed interviews were performed with 25.3% of persons invited to participate in 2020 and 23.9% of those invited to participate in 2021. Statistics reported in this Research Brief are based on interviews performed between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021. Data were weighted to account for each respondent's probability of having been invited to participate in the survey and to align the demographic characteristics of the respondents with those of the U.S. population. Characteristics of the unweighted sample are shown in Table 1.

respondent did not report a distance or duration, reported the distance or duration as unknown, or reported values that were clearly erroneous (i.e., trips whose calculated average speed was <5 miles per hour or >100 miles per hour). All travel data from 67 respondents (0.66% of all respondents) were excluded because they did not report valid distance or duration for any of their trips or because their responses appeared to be suspect (e.g., reported having driven for more than 24 hours in a 24-hour period).

Estimates of daily driving were obtained by computing the mean numbers of trips, minutes, and miles of driving reported by respondents. Estimates of total trips, minutes, and miles driven by all drivers nationwide annually were obtained by multiplying daily driver-level means by 365 to produce annualized statistics and then multiplying by the estimated total number of drivers in the U.S. The total number of drivers in the U.S. was estimated by multiplying the civilian non-institutionalized population aged 16+ (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021) by the survey estimate of the percentage of U.S. residents aged 16+ who drive. All statistics presented in this Research Brief except sample sizes are based on the weighted data. The statistical significance of changes in driving measures from 2020 to 2021 were evaluated at the 95% confidence level using *t* tests of means or proportions.

Trip distance and/or duration were imputed for 833 trips (3.5% of all reported driving trips) in which the

Results

Driving Population

Table 2 shows the percentage of U.S. residents aged 16 years and older who reported driving at least occasionally. Overall, 93.8% of this group reported that they drove in 2021, statistically unchanged from the 93.6% who reported driving in 2020. The proportion of the population that reported driving was highest among adults aged 35–49 and 50–64, lowest among teenagers, and also lower among those ages 20–24 and 75+ than among those aged 25–74. Men were slightly more likely than women to report driving. Respondents who identified as non-Hispanic white were more likely to report driving than were respondents of any other race. The proportion of the population that drives increased with increasing levels of education across all categories of educational attainment examined. Respondents who were married or living with a partner were more likely to report driving than were those who were divorced or separated, widowed, or never married. The proportion of respondents who reported driving was highest among those living in the Midwest and lowest among those living in the Northeast. Respondents living outside of metropolitan areas were more likely to report driving than were those living in metropolitan areas.

Daily Driving Trips

Drivers made an average of 2.56 driving trips per day in 2021, a statistically significant increase over the 2.37 daily driving trips reported in 2020 (Table 3). The increase in daily driving trips was largest among drivers aged 75 years and older, who reported an average of 2.33 trips per day in 2021, significantly more than the 1.85 trips per day reported by drivers aged 75+ in 2020. Drivers aged 35–49 continued to report the greatest number of driving trips each day. Women reported significantly more daily driving trips on average in 2021 than in 2020. Women also reported a greater average daily number of driving trips than men in 2021, a reversal relative to the previous year. Drivers who described themselves as non-Hispanic white reported a statistically significant increase in average daily driving trips in 2021 compared with 2020, as did those who described themselves as Hispanic or Latino. Drivers across all levels of education reported greater numbers of daily driving trips in 2021 than in 2020, though the increase was only statistically significant for those with a bachelor's degree or higher. Increases in daily driving trips were also observed for drivers in all categories of marital status, though the increases were only statistically significant for those who were divorced, separated, or widowed. Drivers who resided in metropolitan areas reported significantly more daily driving trips in 2021 than in 2020. The average daily number of driving trips was significantly lower in the first quarter of

2021 compared with the corresponding period in 2020, but higher in the second, third, and fourth quarters of 2021 than the same quarters in 2020.

Daily Driving Time & Distance

Drivers reported spending an average of 61.3 minutes per day driving in 2021, significantly more than the 55.6 minutes per day they reported driving in 2020 (Table 4). Increases in average daily time spent driving were observed for most age groups; however, drivers aged 25–34 were the only age group for which the increase was statistically significant. (The average amount of time spent driving increased by the largest absolute amount for drivers aged 20–24; however, this group's increase in driving time was not statistically significant due to large sampling variability.) Men continued to spend substantially more time driving each day than women did in 2021, however, both increased in 2021 relative to 2020, and the increase in time spent driving by women was statistically significant. Increases in time spent driving in 2021 compared with 2020 were also statistically significant for drivers who identified as Hispanic or Latino. Hispanic or Latino drivers, as well as Black drivers, reported spending significantly more time driving than non-Hispanic white drivers did. Also of note, high school graduates spent significantly more time driving than college graduates did. Drivers spent significantly less time driving in the first quarter of 2021 than in the first quarter of 2020, but spent significantly more time driving in the second, third, and fourth quarters of 2021 than the same quarters in 2020.

Drivers reported an average of 32.7 miles driven daily in 2021, more than the 28.6 miles reported in 2020, though the difference was not statistically significant due to sampling variability (Table 5). Patterns, however, were generally similar to patterns in time spent driving. The average daily number of miles driven in the first quarter of 2021 was significantly lower than the corresponding average in 2020, whereas the average daily numbers of miles driven in the second through fourth quarters were higher in 2021 than in the same period in 2020.

Overall Population-Level Estimates

The number of U.S. residents of driving age increased slightly, from an estimated 260.1 million people in 2020 to 261.5 million in 2021 (Table 6). In conjunction with the estimated percentage of the population that drives, this indicates that the U.S. driving population comprised approximately 245.3 million drivers in 2021, an increase of approximately 2 million drivers relative to 2020. These

drivers made a total of approximately 229 billion driving trips, spent 91 billion hours behind the wheel, and drove an estimated 2.92 trillion miles in 2021, compared with an estimated 211 billion trips, 82 billion hours, and 2.54 trillion miles of driving in 2020.

Discussion

In this first full year of American Driving Survey data since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the data reveal that Americans have increased their driving substantially relative to the dramatically reduced levels of travel seen throughout most of 2020. A previous analysis of American Driving Survey data from July 2019 through December 2020 found that U.S. drivers made 46% and 30% fewer driving trips each day in April and May of 2020, respectively, than they did on an average day in July through December of 2019. While travel rebounded somewhat in the second half of 2020, the average daily number of driving trips in the second half of 2020 remained approximately 17% lower than it was during the same months in 2019 (Tefft et al., 2021). (Data collection for the 2019 survey began in July; no data are available from 2018 or the first half of 2019 as data collection had been paused to redesign the survey methodology during this time.) The current study finds that, in aggregate, Americans made a total of roughly 18 billion more driving trips, spent 9 billion more hours driving, and drove 380 billion more miles in 2021 than they did in 2020. Collectively, these data indicate that a significant return to the roads took place in 2021, despite the COVID-19 pandemic having not begun to significantly impact public life and travel until mid-March of 2020 and persisting throughout the entirety of 2021.

Unexpected changes in overall traffic safety performance have taken place in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a marked decrease in total vehicle miles of travel in 2020 relative to recent pre-pandemic years, the rate of traffic fatalities per mile driven and the total number of traffic fatalities began increasing in April 2020 and June 2020, respectively (Stewart, 2022). The increase appears to have been sustained throughout 2021, in which preliminary estimates indicate that 42,915 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes, the most in any year since 2005 (National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2022). Although the American Driving Survey does not examine traffic safety outcomes such as driving behavior or crash involvement, its data can provide some relevant insights.

For several years prior to the pandemic, American Driving Survey data typically showed that drivers aged 20–24 and 25–34 drove about as much as drivers aged 35–49 or only slightly less, in terms of average daily time spent driving and miles driven (Kim et al., 2019). However, the

distribution of driving in relation to driver age appears to have shifted, as in 2021 drivers aged 20–24 and 25–34 spent more time driving and drove more miles on average than drivers aged 35–49 did. A shift in the distribution of driving exposure in relation to educational attainment is also apparent. In past years, drivers with higher levels of education consistently spent much more time driving and drove far more miles than drivers with lower levels of education did (Kim et al., 2019). In contrast, in 2020 and 2021, drivers with high school education reported the greatest amount of time spent driving and number of miles driven. It is unsurprising that such shifts occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The prevalence of remote work increased substantially in response to the pandemic, but research has shown that younger adults and persons with lower levels of education are significantly less likely to be able to work from home (Yasenov, 2020).

These shifts in the distribution of driving exposure may have contributed to changes in traffic safety during the pandemic. The rate of fatal crash involvement has been shown to decrease with increasing driver age for all but the oldest drivers (e.g., Tefft, 2017), thus an increase in the driving exposure of younger adults relative to middle-aged adults would be expected to lead to increased traffic fatalities. Indeed, data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration show that the increase in traffic fatalities from 2019 to 2020 was largest among persons aged 25–34 (Stewart, 2022). Previous research has also shown a strong inverse relationship between educational attainment and traffic fatality rate (Harper et al., 2015). Various studies have noted a variety of factors that may contribute to socioeconomic disparities in traffic injuries and fatalities. Some examples include disparities in access to vehicles with modern safety technologies (Girasek & Taylor, 2010), differences in the safety of the environment (Dumbaugh et al., 2020) and availability of post-crash care (Hsia & Shen, 2011) in areas where people of lower socioeconomic status tend to travel, and differences in crash risk (Hasselberg et al (2005); Stamatiadis et al., 2020).

The data reported herein are subject to several limitations that should be noted. The American Driving Survey comprises self-reported information about travel derived from a sample of the population. It is possible that the travel behaviors of survey respondents might differ from those of non-respondents in ways not fully accounted for by weighting the data. It is also possible that respondents might misremember and thus incorrectly report information about their travel. Nonetheless, results agree reasonably well with other estimates of similar quantities derived using other methods. For example, the American Driving Survey estimates that Americans drove 2.54 trillion miles in 2020, whereas the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) estimates, using data derived from

vehicle counts at various locations, that approximately 2.57 trillion miles were driven in light-duty vehicles over the same period (FHWA, 2021). While the American Driving Survey is not specific to light-duty vehicles, it is not designed to capture heavy vehicle travel, thus its estimates should be most comparable to other estimates of light-duty vehicle travel.

In conclusion, travel on U.S. roads rebounded significantly in 2021 from the large reduction that occurred in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety American Driving Survey shows that U.S. drivers made approximately 18 billion more driving trips, spent 9 billion more hours driving, and drove 380 billion more miles in 2021 than they did in 2020. In addition, some new patterns emerged that represent noteworthy changes relative to pre-pandemic travel patterns. Young adult drivers aged 20–34 reported spending more time driving and driving more miles each day in 2021 than drivers aged 35–49 did, and high school graduates reported significantly more driving on average than college graduates did. In light of previous research on traffic risk in relation to age as well as well-documented socioeconomic disparities, these shifts may have important implications for traffic safety. Research on travel, driving behavior, and traffic safety should continue to investigate and find ways to address factors that have contributed to the increased rate of traffic fatalities on U.S. roads during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and education organization. It was founded in 1947 by the American Automobile Association to conduct research to address growing highway safety issues. The organization's mission is to identify traffic safety problems, foster research that seeks solutions, and disseminate information and educational materials. AAA Foundation funding comes from voluntary, tax-deductible contributions from motor clubs associated with the American Automobile Association and the Canadian Automobile Association, individual AAA club members, insurance companies and other individuals or groups.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents, American Driving Survey, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021	Total
All		5,120	5,103	10,223
Age (years)	16–19	186	220	406
	20–24	383	268	651
	25–34	994	1,085	2,079
	35–49	1,189	1,069	2,258
	50–64	1,230	1,240	2,470
	65–74	759	808	1,567
	75+	379	413	792
Sex	Male	2,523	2,562	5,085
	Female	2,597	2,541	5,138
Race & ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	3,144	3,273	6,417
	Black non-Hispanic	609	510	1,119
	Other race or 2+ races non-Hispanic	477	485	962
	Hispanic/Latino (any race)	890	835	1,725
Education	Less than high school	387	383	770
	High school diploma or GED	915	862	1,777
	Some college or 2-year degree	2,179	2,129	4,308
	Bachelor's degree or higher	1,639	1,729	3,368
Marital status	Married	2,404	2,483	4,887
	Living with partner	417	380	797
	Divorced/separated	722	684	1,406
	Widowed	255	243	498
	Never married	1,322	1,313	2,635
Census region	Northeast	771	745	1,516
	Midwest	1,220	1,318	2,538
	South	1,838	1,775	3,613
	West	1,291	1,265	2,556
Place of residence	Non-metro area	866	819	1,685
	Metro area	4,254	4,284	8,538

Table 2. Percent of U.S. Residents Aged 16+ Who Drove At Least Occasionally, in Relation to Selected Demographic Characteristics, United States, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021
All		93.6	93.8
Age (years)	16–19	83.0	85.6
	20–24	88.7	88.1
	25–34	94.9	94.6
	35–49	96.2	95.9
	50–64	95.7	96.1
	65–74	95.0	95.9
	75+	87.9	88.5
Sex	Male	94.5	94.9
	Female	92.7	92.8
Race & ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	95.3	95.1
	Black non-Hispanic	89.1	90.4
	Other race or 2+ races non-Hispanic	93.3	92.6
	Hispanic/Latino (any race)	90.2	92.2
Education	Less than high school	83.3	81.4
	High school diploma or GED	91.3	91.9
	Some college or 2-year degree	95.7	96.4
	Bachelor's degree or higher	97.8	98.1
Marital status	Married	96.7	96.7
	Living with partner	95.8	96.0
	Divorced/separated	94.6	94.8
	Widowed	85.2	81.4
	Never married	88.3	90.1
Census region	Northeast	90.2	89.4
	Midwest	95.5	96.1
	South	94.0	94.3
	West	93.5	94.3
Place of residence	Non-metro area	96.9	95.1
	Metro area	93.1	93.6

Table 3. Average Daily Number of Driving Trips Made by U.S. Drivers in Relation to Selected Characteristics, United States, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021
All		2.37	2.56*
Age (years)	16–19	1.81	1.79
	20–24	2.02	2.37
	25–34	2.51	2.70
	35–49	2.74	2.91
	50–64	2.50	2.59
	65–74	2.06	2.25
	75+	1.85	2.33*
Sex	Male	2.40	2.52
	Female	2.35	2.59*
Race & ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	2.40	2.62*
	Black non-Hispanic	2.48	2.35
	Other race or 2+ races non-Hispanic	2.33	2.14
	Hispanic/Latino (any race)	2.20	2.67*
Education	Less than high school	1.88	2.31
	High school diploma or GED	2.35	2.49
	Some college or 2-year degree	2.49	2.57
	Bachelor's degree or higher	2.47	2.67*
Marital status	Married	2.49	2.54
	Living with partner	2.24	2.61
	Divorced/separated	2.28	2.79*
	Widowed	2.07	2.67*
	Never married	2.30	2.44
Census region	Northeast	2.21	2.51
	Midwest	2.48	2.62
	South	2.38	2.55
	West	2.38	2.54
Place of residence	Non-metro area	2.47	2.44
	Metro area	2.36	2.57*
Month	January–March	2.83	2.39*
	April–June	1.88	2.58*
	July–September	2.36	2.68*
	October–December	2.39	2.59

* Denotes yearly increase or decrease statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

Table 4. Average Daily Number of Minutes Spent Driving by U.S. Drivers in Relation to Selected Characteristics, United States, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021
All		55.6	61.3*
Age (years)	16–19	43.9	35.1
	20–24	52.0	86.8
	25–34	60.4	75.6*
	35–49	61.5	64.0
	50–64	61.2	58.5
	65–74	46.4	47.9
	75+	36.2	45.4
Sex	Male	62.8	68.2
	Female	48.7	54.6*
Race & ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	53.8	57.8
	Black non-Hispanic	65.6	76.0
	Other race or 2+ races non-Hispanic	55.3	47.3
	Hispanic/Latino (any race)	55.8	71.6*
Education	Less than high school	47.3	49.2
	High school diploma or GED	59.4	73.2
	Some college or 2-year degree	57.3	62.7
	Bachelor's degree or higher	54.2	55.0
Marital status	Married	60.8	57.2
	Living with partner	53.4	81.6*
	Divorced/separated	50.2	65.6*
	Widowed	38.0	48.1
	Never married	52.4	62.5
Census region	Northeast	54.3	60.2
	Midwest	50.5	56.3
	South	59.1	62.9
	West	55.5	63.7
Place of residence	Non-metro area	53.5	59.1
	Metro area	55.9	61.6
Month	January–March	64.9	48.3*
	April–June	44.6	55.3*
	July–September	54.8	64.7*
	October–December	57.0	77.8*

* Denotes yearly increase or decrease statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

Table 5. Average Daily Number of Miles Driven by U.S. Drivers in Relation to Selected Demographic Characteristics, United States, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021
All		28.6	32.7
Age (years)	16–19	20.3	16.0
	20–24	24.5	56.7
	25–34	30.7	37.2
	35–49	31.4	32.8
	50–64	32.6	33.5
	65–74	25.2	24.3
	75+	18.9	22.8
Sex	Male	33.7	37.7
	Female	23.7	27.8
Race & ethnicity	White non-Hispanic	28.2	31.8
	Black non-Hispanic	33.5	43.2
	Other race or 2+ races non-Hispanic	30.4	24.5
	Hispanic/Latino (any race)	25.9	32.8
Education	Less than high school	22.6	20.3
	High school diploma or GED	29.5	41.6
	Some college or 2-year degree	29.8	33.0
	Bachelor's degree or higher	29.0	29.5
Marital status	Married	32.3	30.7
	Living with partner	26.0	40.8
	Divorced/separated	28.8	36.1
	Widowed	18.0	21.7
	Never married	24.3	33.8
Census region	Northeast	24.9	28.5
	Midwest	25.5	30.4
	South	32.0	33.3
	West	28.6	36.5
Place of residence	Non-metro area	30.9	37.1
	Metro area	28.3	32.0
Month	January–March	30.6	22.7*
	April–June	24.1	30.6
	July–September	28.9	33.1
	October–December	30.2	44.5

* Denotes difference between years statistically significant at 95% confidence level.
 Values shown in red are imprecise (coefficient of variation > 30%) and should be treated with caution.

Table 6. Daily and Annual Estimates of the Driving Population, Driving Trips, Driving Duration, and Distance Driven, United States, 2020–2021.

		2020	2021
Population aged 16+ years ^a (millions)		261.2	261.5
Drivers	% of population that drives	93.6	93.8
	Number of drivers (millions)	244.4	245.3
Driving trips	Daily trips (per driver, mean)	2.37	2.56*
	Annual trips (per driver, mean)	866	933*
	Annual trips (total all drivers, billions)	212	229*
Time spent driving	Daily (mean per driver, minutes)	55.6	61.3*
	Annual (mean per driver, hours)	338	373*
	Annual (total all drivers, billions of hours)	83	91*
Miles driven	Daily (mean per driver, miles)	28.6	32.7
	Annual (mean per driver, miles)	10,446	11,918
	Annual (total all drivers, trillions of miles)	2.55	2.92

* Denotes difference between years statistically significant at 95% confidence level.

^a Estimated civilian non-institutional population.