

2021 TRAFFIC SAFETY CULTURE INDEX

INTRODUCTION

Since March 2020 when the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic, Americans changed their travel patterns and lifestyles considerably. Although the changes and corresponding impact have remained through 2021 to some degree, the U.S. has started charting a course of recovery from the pandemic. People's daily travel increased and the traffic volumes on major corridors increased accordingly. Unfortunately, traffic fatalities increased to more than prior to the pandemic. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) projected a 10% increase in the estimated total traffic fatalities in 2021 over 2020, which would be the highest number since 2005. As NHTSA's analyses pointed out, unsafe driving behaviors such as speeding, alcohol involvement, and non-use of a seatbelt, account for a considerable proportion of the increased fatalities.

For more than a decade, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has been committed to deepening our understanding of America's traffic safety culture through the annual *Traffic Safety Culture Index* (TSCI) survey. As the impacts of traffic safety on public health have worsened, responses from the 2021 *Traffic Safety Culture Index* can provide insights into understanding public perceptions, attitudes toward, and engagement in unsafe driving behaviors and aspects that should be considered when developing countermeasures.

KEY FINDINGS

Distracted Driving

- Drivers predominantly believe texting/emailing (92%) and reading (93%) on a hand-held cell phone to be very or extremely dangerous. Fewer drivers perceived holding and talking on a hand-held cell phone (77%) or using a technology that allows hands-free use of their phones (17%) as being very or extremely dangerous.
- Less than half of the respondents believed drivers would be apprehended for texting/emailing on a cell phone (43%), reading a text/email (35%), or holding and talking on a cell phone while driving (37%).
- Very few drivers felt that people important to them would approve of them engaging in distracted driving behaviors (4%–12%, depending on the behavior).
- Despite these perceptions, approximately a quarter of drivers (26%) reported having sent a text/email while driving. More drivers reported having read a text/email (36%) while driving or held and talked on a cell phone (37%) while driving. More than half of the drivers (57%) indicated having used a hands-free technology to talk or send texts/emails while driving.
- While 79% of respondents supported a law against holding and talking on a phone while driving, only 45% supported a law against using hands-free technologies to read/text/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](https://www.AAAFoundation.org)

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



Aggressive Driving

- Half of drivers perceived driving 15mph over the speed limit on a freeway to be very or extremely dangerous. More respondents felt that driving through a red light was dangerous (76%).
- Though 63% of drivers believed police would apprehend them for traveling 15mph over the speed limit on a freeway, approximately half reported having engaged in the behavior in the past 30 days before the survey.
- Less than half (45%) of the respondents supported a policy using cameras to automatically ticket drivers who drive more than 10mph over the speed limit on residential streets.

Drowsy Driving

- The majority of drivers perceived drowsy driving to be very or extremely dangerous (95%) and that those important to them would disapprove of the behavior (99%); however, 19% of drivers reported having engaged in the behavior in the past 30 days.
- Few respondents (29%) believed the police would apprehend them for drowsy driving.

Impaired Driving

- Approximately 94% of drivers believed driving after drinking enough alcohol (to the point one considers they might be over the legal limit) was very or extremely dangerous. Only 7% of respondents reported having engaged in this behavior in the past 30 days.
- In contrast to alcohol, only 65% of drivers felt driving (within an hour) of using marijuana to be very or extremely dangerous. However, 93% of drivers believed people important to them would disapprove of the behavior.
- Most respondents (86%) considered driving when using potentially impairing prescription drugs to be very or extremely dangerous. Less than half (43%) of the drivers believed police would apprehend a driver engaging in such behavior (43%).

Comparisons between Drivers' Attitudes and Perceptions and Their Behaviors

- The level of discordance between a driver's self-reported driving behavior and their perceptions of danger, likelihood of apprehension, and social disapproval varied depending on the specific risky behavior.
 - For example, 96% of drivers indicated that people important to them would disapprove of them driving while manually typing/sending a text message/email, but about a quarter reported having done so at least once in the past 30 days before the survey.

- Nearly 90% of drivers felt driving aggressively by switching lanes quickly and/or very close behind another car to be very or extremely dangerous, and about a quarter of drivers admitted to having done so at least once in the past 30 days.
- Correlation analysis suggested that driver's risk-taking behaviors were associated with their perceived danger and social disapproval of the behavior.
- However, there were no association or weak association between one's risk-taking behavior and perceived likelihood of apprehension across all examined unsafe driving behaviors.
- Impaired driving showed higher discordances than other behaviors (regardless of the source of impairment). That is, the gaps between perceived risk/likelihood of apprehension/social disapproval and reported behaviors were larger for these than for other risky behaviors.
- In contrast, speeding behaviors on both freeways and residential streets showed lower discordances.
 - That is, both people's perceived danger and social disapproval have better alignment with their reported engagement in speeding than other unsafe driving behaviors.
 - This may imply that perceived danger and social disapproval would be important factors that drivers weigh in their decision to speed or not.

METHODOLOGY

The 2021 TSCI includes a sample of 2,657 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 2021 TSCI were collected between July 26 and August 30, 2021, using a probability-based sampling panel representative of the U.S. population.

SUGGESTED CITATION

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (2022). *2021 Traffic Safety Culture Index* (Technical Report). Washington D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.