FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

Trends in U.S. Drivers' Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Vehicle Automation, 2019–2025

Advances in automotive technology aim to enhance traffic safety beyond the capabilities of earlier vehicles. Vehicle technologies have progressed from basic assistance systems to higher levels of automation, including services like robotaxis. As these technologies continue to develop, it is essential to understand how drivers' perceptions and attitudes toward these systems are evolving. Examining these trends can help us understand whether drivers are willing to adopt new vehicle technologies and what barriers may limit adoption, which in turn can inform future vehicle technology development. This research brief examines national trends (2019 to 2025) in adoption preferences, perceived safety, trust, and concerns related to different levels of vehicle automation, as well as perceived comfort with various modes of transportation equipped with full automation (i.e., Level 5). The results show that over time, drivers increasingly preferred more assistive technology (e.g., Level 2), perceived it as safer, trusted it more, and had fewer concerns. Adoption preferences shifted toward Level 2 regardless of initial choices. Malfunction was the most frequently reported concern across all levels of automation. Comfort with Level 5–equipped subways and trains increased over time, whereas it declined for other modes, such as robotaxis and privately owned vehicles.

METHOD

Survey

Data used in this research brief were collected through the Traffic Safety Culture Index (TSCI) survey. For more than a decade, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAAFTS) has conducted a nationally representative TSCI survey every year (around July/August) to assess respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward traffic safety. Beginning in 2019, the survey added a consistent set of questions focused on respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward different levels of vehicle automation.

The TSCI survey was administered online in English and Spanish to a sample of participants from an online research panel whose participants were recruited based on standard probability-based random digit dial and address-based sampling methods. The sample was designed to represent the U.S. population aged 16 and older, with an oversample of young people aged 16 to 18. If a sampled household did not have an internet connection or an internet-capable computer, a web-enabled device and/or free internet service were provided. The data were weighted to account for the probabilities of being selected as online panelists and as survey respondents, and non-response at both recruitment stages. Weights were further adjusted to align respondents' characteristics to those of the U.S. population. Detailed survey instruments, sampling,

and weighting processes can be found in the previous report (Zhang & Steinbach, 2025).

For questions related to respondents' perceptions and attitudes toward different levels of vehicle automation, respondents first viewed an educational video explaining the distinctions among automation levels. The definitions of vehicle automation levels used in the TSCI survey are listed in Table 1. Note that these definitions for Level 0 through Level 5 remained consistent throughout the study period but may not reflect the most recent SAE standards (SAE International, 2021).

Respondents were then asked, *'How would you rate your understanding of the levels of automated vehicle technology?'* A five-point Likert scale was provided with the following response options: excellent understanding, very good understanding, understand some things, do not understand very much, and do not understand anything. Only respondents with a valid driver's license who reported at least some understanding of vehicle automation were included in the following analyses. These respondents are referred to as drivers hereafter.

The survey then assessed drivers' adoption preferences, perceived safety, trust, concerns across automation levels, and comfort with Level 5 transportation modes. See Appendix A for detailed survey questions, sample size, and data availability.

Table 1. Definitions of Different Levels of Vehicle Automation in the TSCI Survey

Vehicle Automation Level	Definition
L0	The vehicle can only provide warnings and momentary assistance.
L1	The vehicle can control steering OR acceleration/deceleration capabilities. The driver is expected to be in control of the vehicle at all times.
L2	The vehicle can control steering AND acceleration/deceleration capabilities. The driver is still expected to be in control of the vehicle at all times.
L3	The vehicle controls all aspects of driving (i.e., steering, braking, and acceleration) but the driver is expected to take over when prompted by the vehicle.
L4	The vehicle is completely self-driving under some conditions; when operating in autonomous mode, the driver is not expected to take control of the vehicle and does not have to pay attention to the task of driving.
L5	The vehicle is completely self-driving anywhere at any time.

Data Overview

Data from 2019 to 2025 were combined into a single dataset. Due to the panel nature of the sample frame, it was possible for households to participate in multiple years of the survey. For households that participated in multiple years, one response per household was randomly selected for inclusion in the final dataset. Survey weights were then rescaled to reflect the effective sample size for each year. Table 2 presents the demographic distribution of the unweighted sample used in this study. Survey weights were applied throughout the analyses, making the results nationally representative. In addition, survey-weighted logistic regression models were used to test for statistically significant trends.

Table 2. Demographic Distribution of the Unweighted Sample by Year

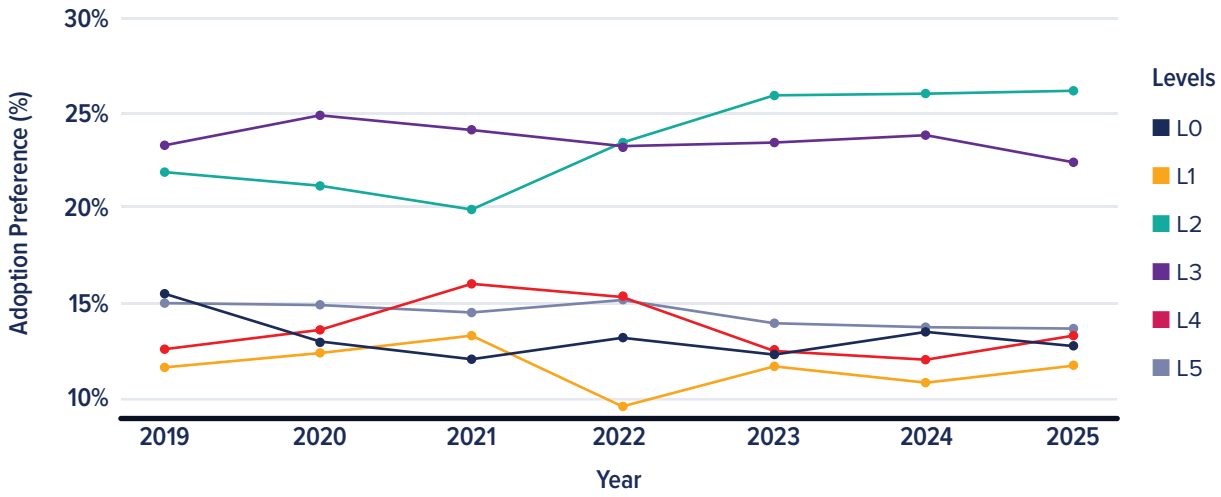
Year		2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
	Overall unweighted *n*	2,039	2,218	1,946	1,804	1,969	1,942	1,992
Demographics		Weighted % (Unweighted *n*)						
Gender	Female	52.1% (1,012)	52.8% (1,113)	53.0% (987)	53.1% (907)	51.4% (969)	50.7% (953)	51.2% (996)
	Male	47.9% (1,027)	47.2% (1,105)	47.0% (959)	46.9% (897)	48.6% (1,000)	49.3% (989)	48.8% (996)
Age	16 to 24	6.8% (311)	8.4% (341)	8.4% (330)	8.8% (315)	8.1% (313)	9.1% (371)	9.3% (409)
	25 to 59	60.5% (968)	60.3% (1,094)	59.5% (885)	58.0% (778)	57.7% (937)	58.3% (880)	58.7% (909)
	60+	32.6% (760)	31.2% (783)	32.1% (731)	33.2% (711)	34.2% (719)	32.6% (691)	32.1% (674)
Educational Attainment	Teen	2.3% (267)	1.8% (255)	2.2% (264)	2.0% (254)	1.8% (231)	2.1% (282)	2.3% (306)
	High school or less	31.1% (499)	30.1% (530)	29.8% (464)	28.0% (380)	28.0% (457)	27.6% (421)	27.7% (447)
	Some college/associate degree	31.6% (529)	31.6% (558)	32.2% (550)	33.6% (451)	31.4% (491)	30.8% (476)	29.8% (482)
	Bachelor's degree or higher	35.0% (744)	36.5% (875)	35.8% (668)	36.3% (719)	38.8% (790)	39.6% (763)	40.1% (757)
Region	Northeast	15.9% (383)	16.3% (353)	15.4% (346)	15.9% (323)	16.4% (343)	15.1% (336)	15.2% (343)
	Midwest	22.8% (508)	22.2% (598)	21.9% (454)	21.1% (405)	23.0% (492)	22.3% (459)	22.7% (486)
	South	37.6% (689)	37.6% (743)	38.0% (687)	39.1% (670)	37.4% (695)	39.0% (691)	38.0% (721)
	West	23.6% (459)	23.9% (524)	24.6% (459)	23.9% (406)	23.3% (439)	23.6% (456)	24.1% (442)

RESULTS

Adoption Preferences

The survey question asked drivers, *'If cost were no barrier and you could own a vehicle with any level of automated technology within the next couple of years, which level would you be most comfortable with?'* Responses were rated across levels of automation technology, Level 0 through Level 5. Figure 1 presents the percentages of nationally representative adoption preferences for each level of vehicle automation by year.

Figure 1. Adoption Preferences of Different Levels of Vehicle Automation (L0–L5) by Year



Drivers showed higher adoption preferences for Level 2 automation (ranging from 20% to 26%) and Level 3 (ranging from 23% to 24%) compared to other automation levels. Statistical tests indicated that driver adoption preference for Level 2 has been increasing over time compared to other levels. Temporal trends for other levels were not statistically significant.

Adoption preferences were further analyzed by gender, age, educational attainment, and region of residence (see Appendix B). Female drivers showed higher adoption preferences for Levels 1, 2, and 3 compared to male drivers, but lower preferences for Levels 4 and 5. Drivers aged 60 and older tended to prefer Level 2 automation, whereas younger drivers favored Levels 4 and 5. Drivers with a bachelor's degree or higher were more likely to prefer higher levels of automation than those with lower educational attainment. No significant differences in adoption preferences were observed among regions of residence across all levels of vehicle automation. Also, no statistically significant temporal trends were observed among different demographic categories.

While the survey was not designed to be able to assess changes in individual adoption preferences over time, the panel nature of the survey sampling methodology presents a unique opportunity. Some respondents answered the survey in multiple years: 316 drivers answered equivalent survey questions at least once in 2019 or 2020 and at least once in 2024 or 2025, allowing analyses of changes in adoption preferences over time. While this affords the opportunity to examine

changes, it is important to note that these drivers are not necessarily representative of the U.S. population. Table 3 below shows the percentages of drivers whose adoption preferences stayed the same, moved to higher automation levels, or moved to lower automation levels. Detailed adoption percentage changes for each level (Level 0 to Level 5) can be found in Appendix C.

Table 3. Changes in Vehicle Automation Adoption Preferences Within Individuals Between 2019/20 and 2024/25

Initial Preferred Automation Level	Initial Percentage	Changed Preference to:		
		Lower Automation	No Change	Higher Automation
L0	10.4%	0.0%	51.5%	48.5%
L1	9.5%	20.0%	30.0%	50.0%
L2	24.1%	19.7%	52.6%	27.6%
L3	22.2%	41.4%	35.7%	22.9%
L4	18.4%	56.9%	32.8%	10.3%
L5	15.5%	57.1%	42.9%	0.0%

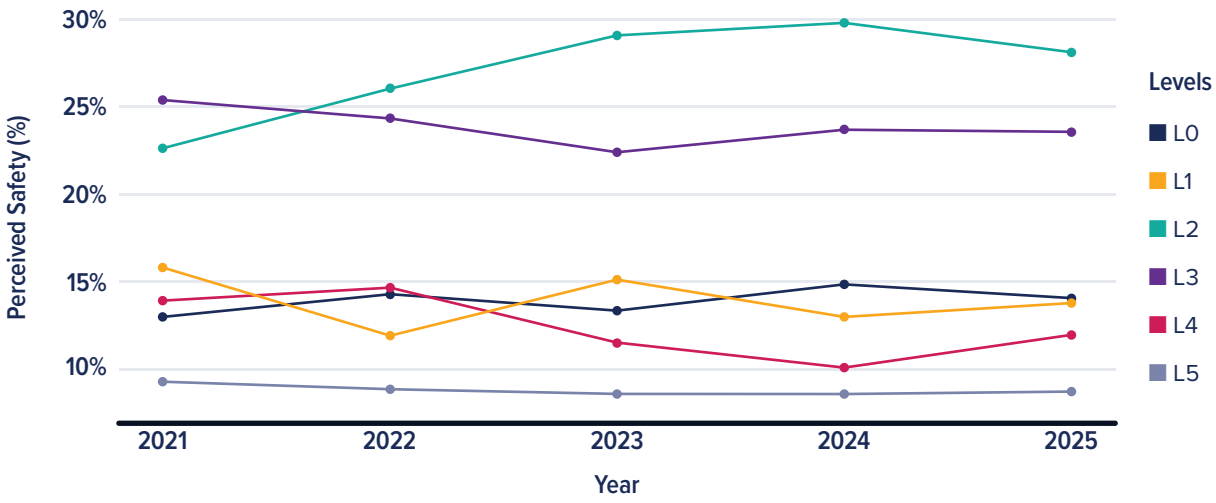
Among the 316 drivers who responded in both time periods, adoption preferences showed notable shifts across automation levels. Overall, these patterns suggested a trend toward moderate automation levels (Level 2 and Level 3). Drivers who initially preferred no automation (Level 0) or minimal automation (Level 1) showed the highest rates of moving to higher levels (48.5% and 50.0%, respectively), primarily shifting to Level 2. Drivers who initially preferred Level 2 automation demonstrated the greatest stability, with 52.6% maintaining their preference over time. In contrast, 56.9% of those who initially preferred Level 4 and 57.1% who preferred Level 5 shifted down, mainly to Level 2 or Level 3. Level 3 preferences exhibited mixed patterns, with 35.7% staying the same, 22.9% moving higher (mainly to Level 4), and 41.4% moving lower (mainly to Level 2; see Appendix C for details).

Perceived Safety

One survey question asked drivers, *'What level of automated vehicle technology would you personally feel safest having in a car that you use regularly?'* Responses were rated across Levels 0 through 5. Figure 2 presents the percentages of drivers who perceived each level of vehicle automation as safe, by year.

Levels 2 and 3 had the highest percentages of drivers reporting them as safe, aligning with their adoption preferences, while Level 5 had the lowest percentage. Over time, the percentage of drivers perceiving Level 4 as safe declined significantly compared to Level 0, whereas Level 2 saw a significant increase in the percentage of drivers rating it as safe. When broken down by demographic groups (see Appendix D), the percentages of drivers perceiving different automation levels as safe remained relatively stable over time, with no statistically significant temporal trends. The trends in perceived safety percentages across automation levels were largely consistent with adoption preference trends within each demographic group.

Figure 2. Perceived Safety of Different Levels of Vehicle Automation (L0–L5) by Year

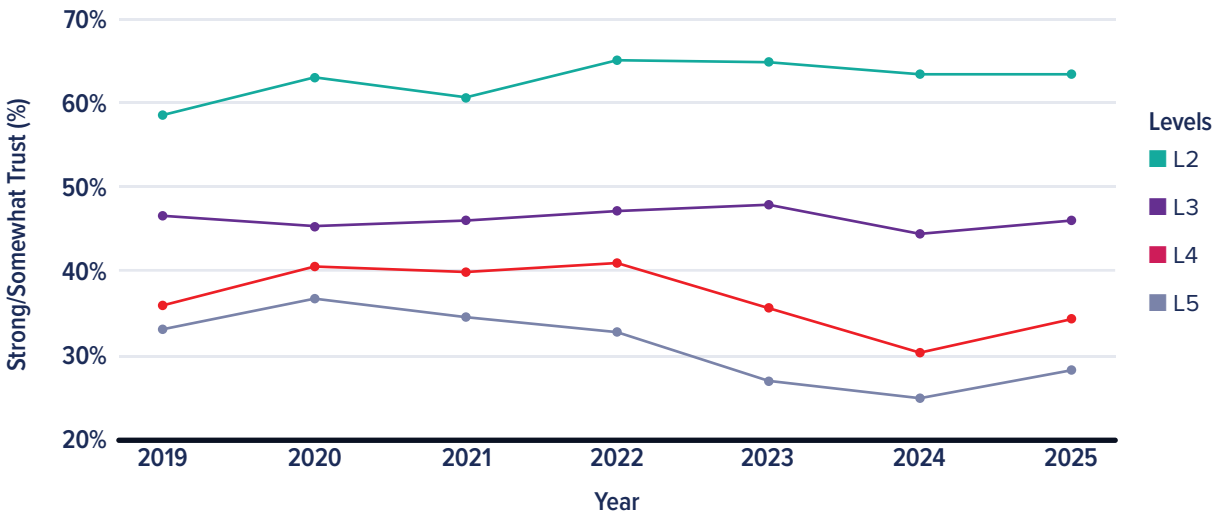


Trust

One survey question asked drivers, *'How much would you trust level 2/3/4/5 technology to reduce the likelihood of a crash happening?'* Figure 3 shows the percentages of drivers who reported strongly or somewhat trusting each level of vehicle automation by year.

Based on the statistical testing, a significant increasing trend was observed for trust in Level 2 automation over time. In contrast, drivers reported declining trust in Levels 4 and 5. Drivers' trust was further analyzed by demographic groups (see Appendix E). Both males and females placed the highest trust in Level 2. Among males, trust in Levels 4 and 5 showed a statistically significant decreasing trend. A similar declining pattern was observed among drivers with a bachelor's degree.

Figure 3. Trust in Different Levels of Vehicle Automation (L2–L5) by Year



Concerns

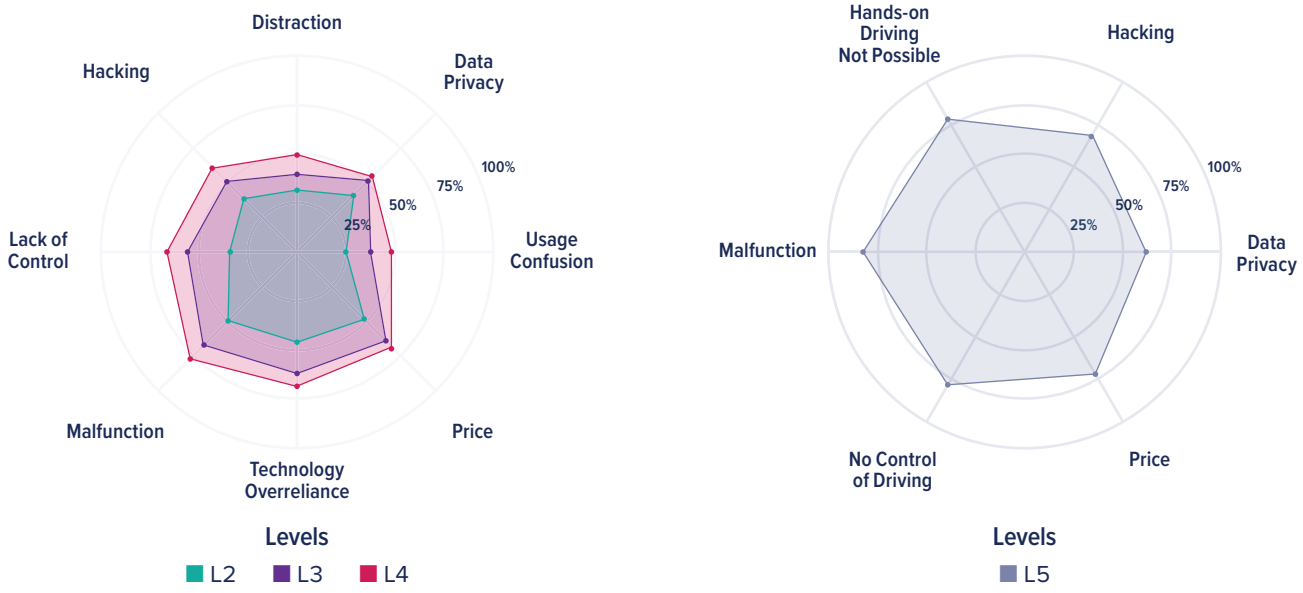
Drivers were asked to rate potential concerns about different levels of vehicle automation, from Level 2 through Level 5. Drivers rated several concerns below across automation levels using a five-point Likert scale (see Appendix A for details):

- Level 2 through Level 5: malfunction, price, hacking, data privacy.
- Level 2 through Level 4: technology over-reliance, confusion on usage, lack of driving control, and potential for the technology to be distracting.
- Level 5 only: hands-on driving is no longer possible, and no control of driving.

While all concerns regarding Level 2 automation decreased statistically significantly over time, concerns for other automation levels (Level 3 to Level 5) showed no statistically significant trends for most categories. Figure 4 displays the percentage of drivers who indicated being "extremely" or "very concerned" about each concern item related to vehicle automation, as measured in 2025.

In 2025, drivers expressed the greatest concern about Level 5 automation, particularly regarding malfunction (80.6%), hacking (68.1%), data privacy (61.4%), and cost (71.7%), compared with other levels of vehicle automation. In contrast, Level 2 consistently attracted the lowest proportion of concerned drivers across all categories, including malfunction (47.2%), cost (46.8%), technology over-reliance (44.0%), data privacy (39.6%), hacking (36.0%), lack of control (32.6%), potential for distraction (30.1%), and confusion on usage (24.9%). Across all levels of automation, malfunction was the most commonly reported concern, with 47.2% to 80.6% of drivers expressing concern for Levels 2 through 5. Cost ranked as the second most commonly reported concern for Levels 2 through 4, with 46.8% to 66.6% of drivers reporting concern.

Figure 4. Concerns of Different Levels of Vehicle Automation in 2025



Comfort with Level 5 Across Transportation Modes

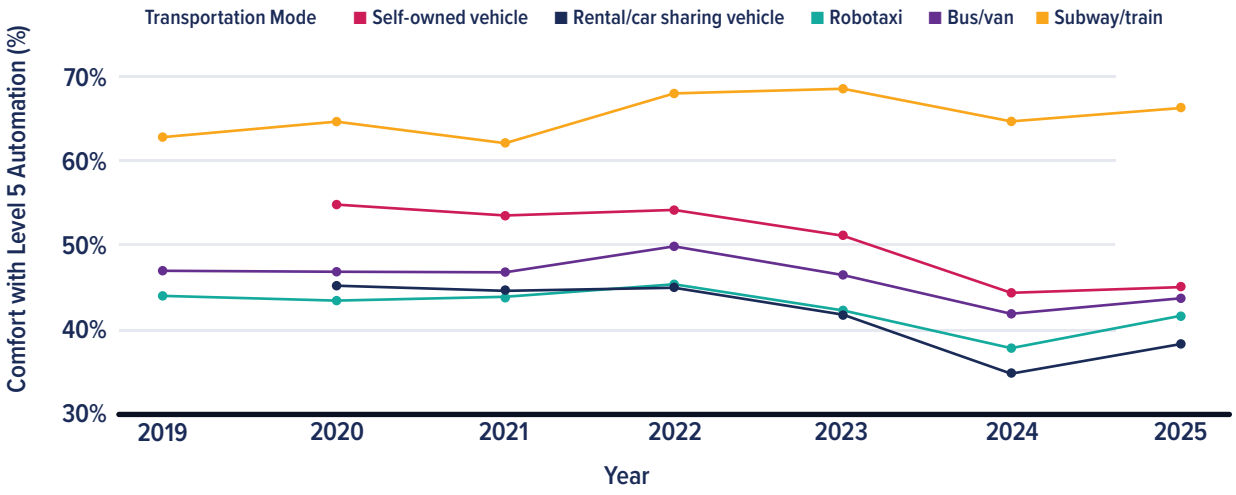
One survey question asked drivers how comfortable they would be using Level 5 technology in the following modes of transportation:

- Self-owned vehicle
- Rental/car-sharing vehicle (Zipcar)
- Ride-hailing vehicle (Uber, Lyft, etc.)/taxi
- Bus/van
- Subway/train

Drivers selected from three options: comfortable, somewhat comfortable, or not comfortable at all. In 2019, response options regarding self-owned and rental vehicles were not included in the survey. Figure 5 shows the percentage of drivers' concern levels for different transportation modes with Level 5 automation, broken down by year.

The percentage of drivers who felt at least somewhat comfortable with Level 5 automation was highest for subway/train and showed a statistically significant increasing trend over time. In contrast, comfort levels for all other transportation modes exhibited statistically significant decreasing trends.

Figure 5. Comfort with Level 5 by Transportation Mode



DISCUSSION

This study investigated temporal changes in drivers' perceptions and attitudes across varying levels of vehicle automation. Level 2 technology emerged as the most preferred option in recent years, with drivers perceiving it as the safest and most trustworthy, compared to other levels. Over time, these positive perceptions strengthened, while concerns about Level 2 technology declined.

Most newer vehicles are now equipped with both lane centering assist (LCA) and adaptive cruise control (ACC), which together control steering and speed simultaneously. Morden systems, such as Tesla Autopilot, GM Super Cruise, and Ford BlueCruise, build on these features to automatically maintain lane position and following distance through automatic acceleration and braking as needed (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, n.d.; SAE International, 2021). These vehicle features fall under Level 2 Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS), with the intended purpose to reduce variability in driving performance and improve traffic safety. Prior research suggests that these systems can enhance safety outcomes (Kim & Oviedo-Trespalacios, 2025; Masello et al., 2022). Note that their effectiveness depends on drivers consistently and correctly using these systems. However, previous studies have found that drivers frequently disengage or discontinue use of Level 2 ADAS (Gaspar et al., 2020; Kim & Oviedo-Trespalacios, 2025; Nandavar et al., 2023; Nordhoff et al., 2021), potentially due to factors such as trust, perceived risk, driving styles, and ease of use (Kim & Oviedo-Trespalacios, 2025; Yang et al., 2023). Additionally, some drivers misuse these systems, as evidenced by engagement in secondary tasks (Dunn et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a critical need to understand why and when drivers disengage or abandon these systems, and whether they fully comprehend both the proper usage and limitations of ADAS. Understanding these behavioral patterns and knowledge gaps can fundamentally reshape and inform the future development of ADAS technologies, promote their proper use, and thereby enhance traffic safety.

Moreover, higher levels of automation, often referred to as Automated Driving Systems (ADS), have emerged with the aim of reducing human errors, which remain the leading cause of traffic crashes (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, n.d.). Although fully automated vehicles are not yet available for individual consumer purchase, certain applications of ADS, such as robotaxi services, are currently operating and accessible to the public in several U.S. cities.

Most ADS benefits require not only sufficiently advanced technology but also a sufficiently high adoption rate (Zhang et al., 2024). Factors such as public perceived safety and trust are critical in influencing ADS adoption (Peng & Robinson-Tay, 2025). However, this study found no statistically significant increasing trends in trust, perceived safety, or adoption preference for higher levels of automation (Level 3 through Level 5). Instead, drivers expressed greater concerns about these technologies, particularly regarding malfunctions. These concerns likely stem from the fact that ADS are still at early development stages, and the public is often exposed to media coverage of crashes and risky behaviors of robotaxis. Such coverage has included incidents where robotaxis drove past stopped school buses with extended stop signs, proceeded through active police scenes, made illegal U-turns, and executed aggressive maneuvers (Koopman, 2025). Such incidents may have shaped public perceptions and raised safety doubts.

Therefore, as ADS continue to be the focus of extensive research, testing, and development, the current public skepticism highlights the need for understanding public trust, concerns, and adoption barriers of ADS more in depth. Such insights can inform technology design, address safety concerns, improve public acceptance

and adoption preference, and, in turn, help realize the broader societal benefits of ADS.

A limitation of this research is that the survey questions are generalized, and the definitions of the levels of automation used were conceptualized nearly a decade ago. In order to facilitate comparisons over time, the survey-defined levels of technology did not evolve between 2019 and 2025. While this study was able to usefully illuminate trends over time, the restrictive approach to defining levels of technology may not adequately address the above-mentioned challenges related to ADAS and ADS, nor do they necessarily reflect how drivers think about vehicle technology in their daily lives. AAAFTS is working to address these limitations by developing multiple nationally representative surveys to examine public perceptions and attitudes toward ADAS and ADS in greater depth. Future efforts will examine key ADAS features, as well as current existing ADS deployments (e.g., robotaxis) using a more comprehensive set of measures. Targeted respondents will include those in the United States and potentially internationally. The collective findings from this research brief and future surveys will help industry and the public better understand perceptions and attitudes toward these technologies, identify barriers to adoption, inform future technology development, and ultimately advance safe mobility.

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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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APPENDIX A. SURVEY QUESTIONS

Theme	Survey Question		Response Options	Sample
Adoption Preference	If cost were no barrier and you could own a vehicle with any level of automated technology within the next couple of years, with what level would you be most comfortable?		Levels 0/1/2/3/4/5	All respondents
Perceived Safety	What level of automated vehicle technology would you personally feel safest having in a car that you use regularly?		Levels 0/1/2/3/4/5	All respondents
Trust	How much would you trust a vehicle with Level 2/3/4/5 technology in avoiding a crash?		1. Strongly trust 2. Somewhat trust 3. Neither trust nor distrust 4. Somewhat distrust 5. Strongly distrust	Randomly selected respondents
Concerns	Rate the potential concerns of Level 2/3/4/5 automated vehicle technology	Technology might malfunction[1,2]	1. Extremely concerned 2. Very concerned 3. Moderately concerned 4. Slightly concerned 5. Not concerned at all	Randomly selected respondents
		Driver might become over-reliant on the technology[1]		
		Purchase price/may be too expensive[1,2]		
		Confusion on how and when to use[1]		
		Hack of vehicle (accessing car computer network and disabling features)[1,2]		
		Lack of driving control1		
		Technology might be distracting and/or annoying[1]		
		Data privacy (tracking where you are and how much you are driving)[1,2]		
		Hands-on (manual) driving is no longer possible[2]		
		No control of driving[2]		
Mode Comfort (Level 5)	How comfortable would you be using the modes of transportation with level 5?	Self-owned vehicle	1. Comfortable 2. Somewhat comfortable 3. Not comfortable at all	All respondents
		Rental/car sharing vehicle (Zipcar)		
		Ride-hailing vehicle (Uber, Lyft, etc.)/taxi		
		Bus/van		
		Subway/train		

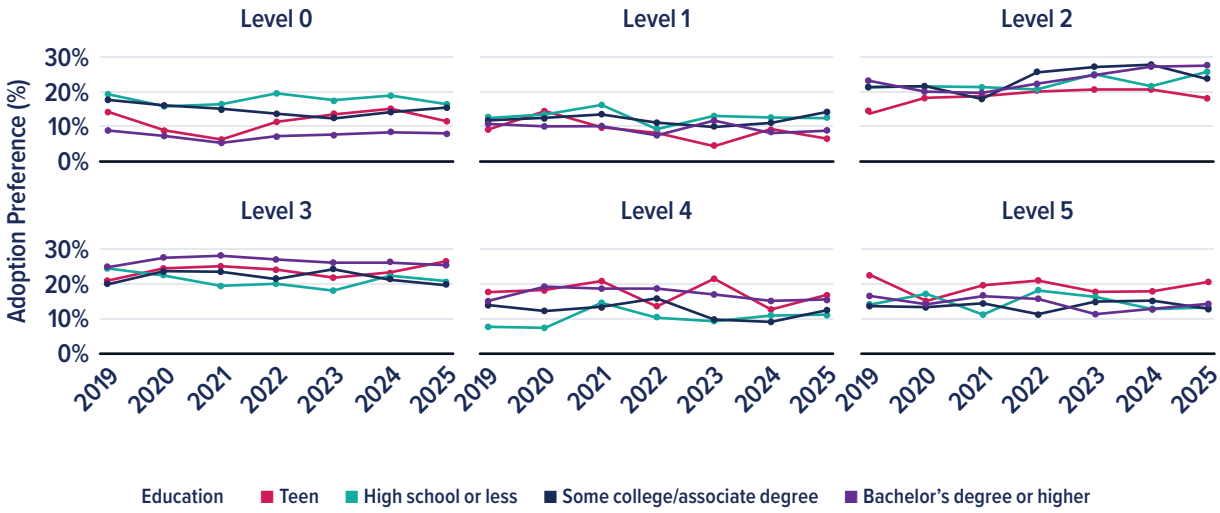
[1] Indicates the questions for Levels 2 to 4.
[2] Indicates the questions specifically for Level 5. Data for all these themes are available from 2019 to 2025, with the exception of "Perceived Safety," which is available from 2021 to 2025.

APPENDIX B. ADOPTION PREFERENCES

Adoption Preferences by Gender

Adoption Preferences by Age

Adoption Preferences by Educational Attainment



Adoption Preferences by Region

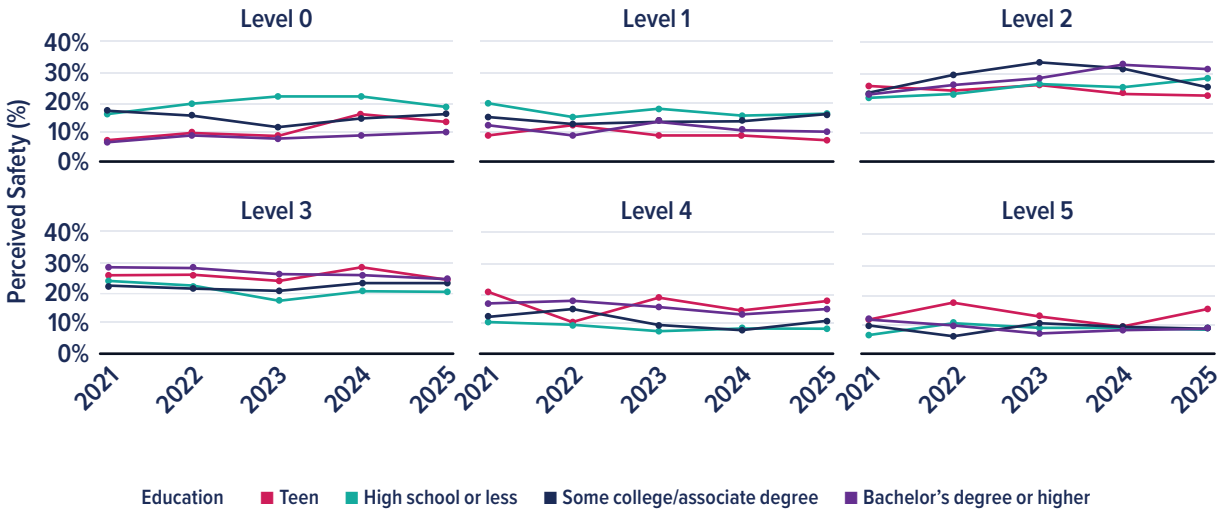
APPENDIX C. CHANGES IN ADOPTION PREFERENCES BY AUTOMATION LEVEL

Changes in Vehicle Automation Adoption Preferences Within Individuals between 2019/20 and 2024/25, by Automation Level

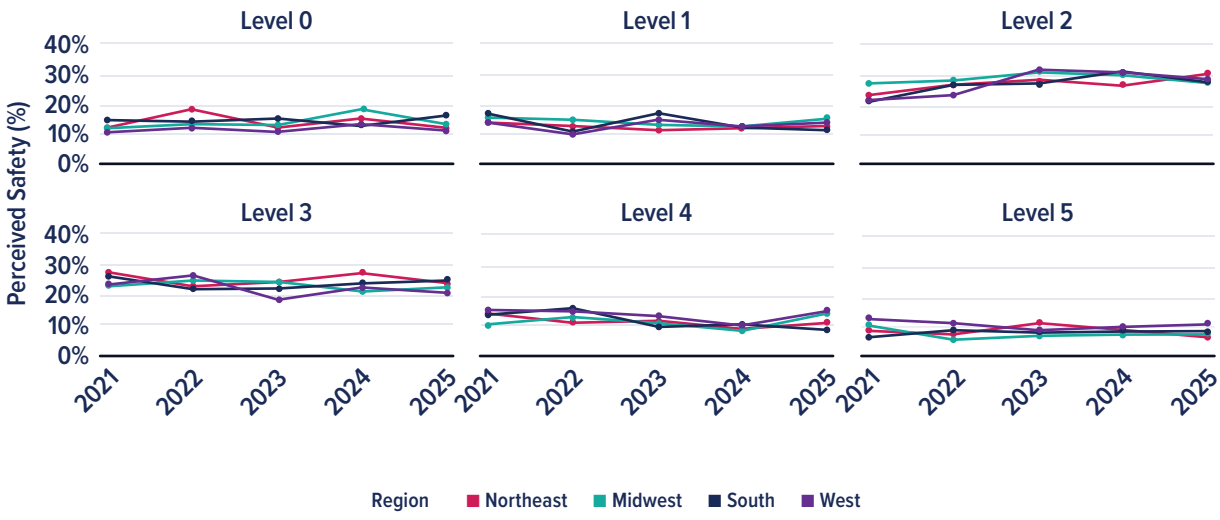
Initial Preferred Automation Level	Initial Percentage	Changed Preference to:					
		L0	L1	L2	L3	L4	L5
L0	10.4%	51.5%	18.2%	24.2%	0.0%	0.0%	6.1%
L1	9.5%	20.0%	30.0%	36.7%	10.0%	3.3%	0.0%
L2	24.1%	6.6%	13.2%	52.6%	17.1%	1.3%	9.2%
L3	22.2%	5.7%	7.1%	28.6%	35.7%	15.7%	7.1%
L4	18.4%	3.4%	1.7%	22.4%	29.3%	32.8%	10.3%
L5	15.5%	8.2%	4.1%	16.3%	14.3%	14.3%	42.9%

APPENDIX D. PERCEIVED SAFETY

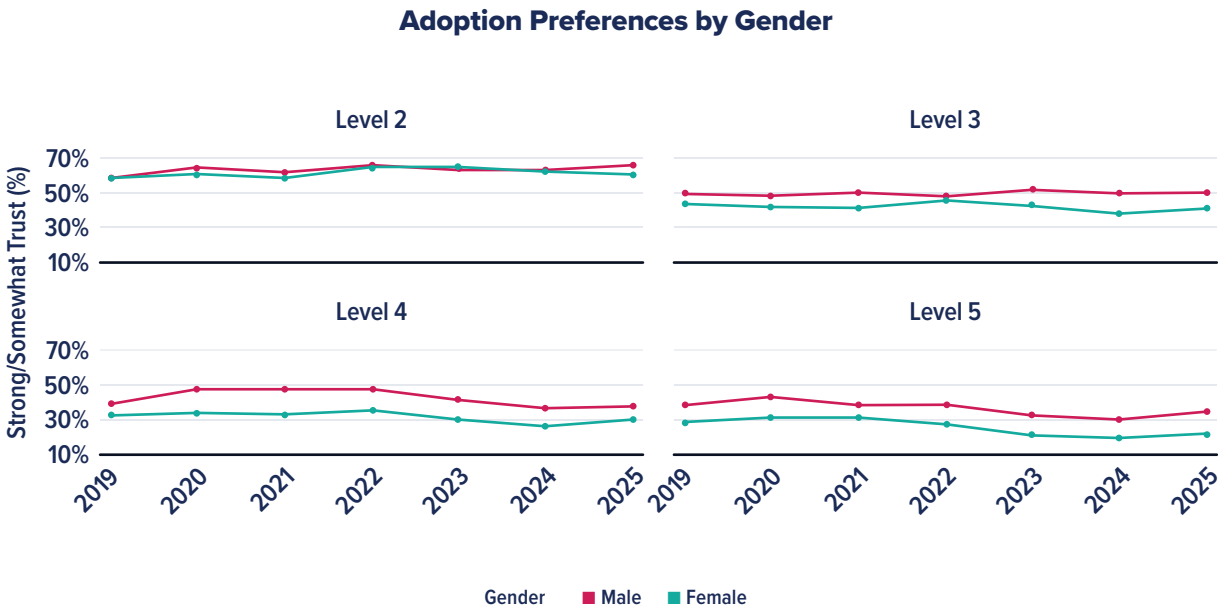
Perceived Safety by Educational Attainment

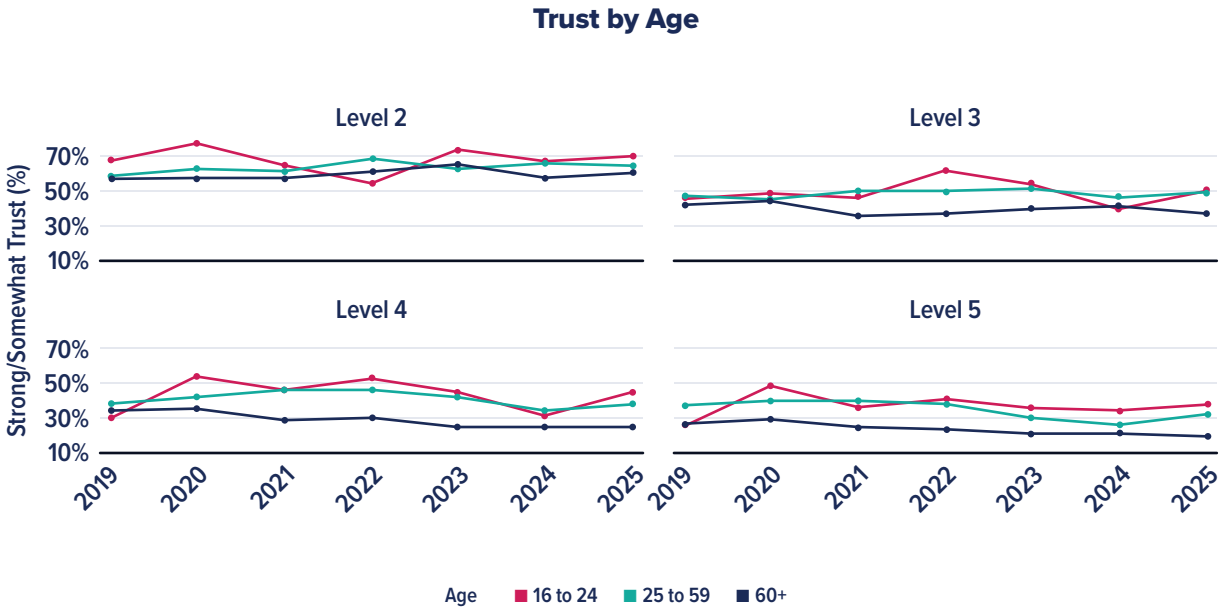


Perceived Safety by Region

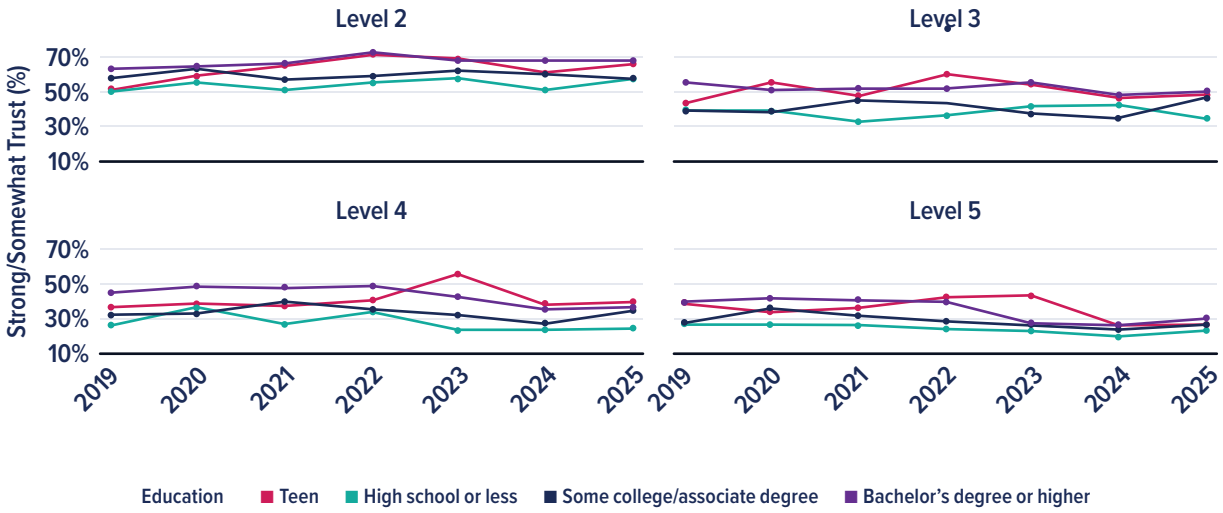


APPENDIX E. STRONG / SOMEWHAT TRUST





Trust by Educational Attainment



Trust by Region