

# 2023 Traffic Safety Culture Index

## INTRODUCTION

The National Highway Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates that 40,990 people died in motor vehicle crashes in the United States in 2023. Although this perilously high number represents a small decline in motor vehicle–related fatalities compared to 2022, each death represents an unacceptable human, societal, and economic cost. While causes of motor vehicle fatalities are complex, NHTSA reports risky driving behaviors such as speeding, alcohol involvement, and non-seat belt use are linked to tens of thousands of traffic deaths each year.

Reducing risky driving and, conversely, encouraging safe driving are important contributions to improving road safety. However, changing behavior is challenging, as driving styles develop into habits over people’s lives, guided by personality, demographics, driving experiences, vehicle characteristics, and both the physical and cultural environments.

This report provides an in-depth examination of the cultural environment of driving in America, specifically, Traffic Safety Culture: the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and attitudes that help to shape Americans’ behavior on the road. 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. While levels of U.S. traffic fatalities remain excessively high, responses from the 2023 TSCI can provide insights into understanding public perceptions, attitudes toward, and engagement in unsafe driving behaviors, which provide valuable insights for countermeasure development aimed at behavior change.

## METHODOLOGY

The 2023 TSCI includes a sample of 2,739 U.S. licensed drivers ages 16 or older who completed the online survey and reported having driven at least once in the 30 days prior to the survey. Participants were asked questions regarding perceived danger, risk of apprehension, and social disapproval of dangerous driving behaviors, their support for laws and policies designed to curtail these behaviors, as well as self-reported engagement in these behaviors. Data from the 2023 TSCI were collected between August 1 and August 21, 2023, using a

## TECHNICAL REPORT:

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. (2024). *2023 Traffic Safety Culture Index* (Technical Report). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

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## ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

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.

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probability-based sampling panel representative of the U.S. population. After collection, data underwent a rigorous cleaning and quality assurance process. Finally, data were weighted to account for probability of selection for recruitment into both the panel and the survey, non-response at both stages, and were calibrated to align with known population totals from the Census.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Distracted Driving

- Roughly 93% of drivers identified both texting/emailing and reading on a hand-held cell phone as very or extremely dangerous. Fewer drivers perceived holding and talking on a cell phone (78%) or using hands-free technology (16%) as very or extremely dangerous.
- Just over one third of respondents perceived drivers would be likely to be apprehended for texting/emailing, reading a text/email, and holding and talking on a cell phone while driving.
- Drivers predominantly agreed that people important to them would disapprove of distracted driving behaviors (85%–96% depending on the behavior).
- Nevertheless, many drivers reported sending a text/email (27%), reading a text/email (37%), or holding and talking on a phone (36%) while driving in the past 30 days. The majority of drivers (59%) indicated they used a hands-free technology to talk/text/email while driving.
- Eight out of ten drivers supported a law against holding and talking on a phone while driving, while only 42% supported a law against using hands-free technologies to read/text/email while driving.

### Aggressive Driving

- Most respondents perceived driving through a red light (81%) and aggressive driving (89%) as very or extremely dangerous.
- Fewer drivers perceived speeding as a dangerous behavior. The speeding behaviors had the lowest social disapproval of all the examined unsafe driving behaviors.
- About 59% of drivers believed police would apprehend them for traveling 15mph over the speed limit on a freeway, yet approximately half reported having engaged in the behavior in the past 30 days before the survey.
- Fewer than half (45%) of respondents supported a policy using cameras to automatically ticket drivers driving more than 10 mph over the speed limit on residential streets.

### Drowsy Driving

- Drivers predominantly perceived drowsy driving to be very or extremely dangerous (96%); however, 20% of drivers reported having engaged in the behavior in

the past 30 days. Almost 3 in 10 drivers believed the police would apprehend them for drowsy driving.

### Impaired Driving

- Drivers overwhelmingly perceived driving after drinking (95%) as very or extremely dangerous and 67% believed such a driver would be likely to be apprehended by police. Only 7% of respondents reported having engaged in this behavior in the past 30 days.
- By comparison, only 70% of drivers felt driving (within an hour) of using marijuana to be very or extremely dangerous and 26% believed such a driver would be likely to be apprehended by police. Only 6% of respondents reported having engaged in this behavior in the past 30 days.

### Identifying Profiles of Risky Driving

- Based on the patterns of reported risky driving behavior engagement, the following five unique groups were identified using a latent class analysis and were interpreted as follows:
  - **Safe Drivers (34.9%):** Rarely engaged in any risky driving behavior.
  - **Distracted Drivers (19.0%):** Predominantly engaged in all distracted driving behaviors.
  - **Speeding Drivers (32.6%):** Predominantly engaged in speeding behaviors.
  - **Distracted and Aggressive Drivers (11.0%):** Predominantly engaged in both distracted driving and aggressive driving behaviors.
  - **Most Dangerous Drivers (2.5%):** Engaged in all risky driving behaviors.
- Safe Drivers reported driving less frequently than other driving profiles, while Most Dangerous Drivers, Distracted Drivers, and Distracted and Aggressive Drivers reported driving more frequently than other driving profiles.
- Across all risky driving behaviors examined, more Safe Drivers perceived the behaviors to be dangerous and socially disapproved of, compared to all other driving profiles, though differences were not always statistically significant. There were no differences in perceived risk of apprehension between Safe Drivers and other driving profiles.