



# Youth Distracted Driving Survey

## National Results

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**TRAFFIC INJURY RESEARCH FOUNDATION USA, INC.**



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On behalf of the US **National Distracted Driving Coalition (NDDC)**, the **Traffic Injury Research Foundation, USA, Inc. (TIRF USA)** conducted a survey of youth on the topic of distracted driving. A total of 1,217 young drivers responded to the survey from 26 states, with 95 respondents opting not to disclose their state. Responding states included: AL, AZ, CA, CO, DE, FL, GA, IL, IN, KS, MD, MA, MI, MO, NE, NJ, NY, OH, OK, PA, TN, SC, TX, VA, DC, WY.

## Respondent demographics

Among the 1,217 respondents who completed the survey, the average age was 16 years. The proportion of respondents associated with each age category was as follows:

- aged 14: 5%
- aged 15: 19%
- aged 16: 31%
- aged 17: 29%
- aged 18: 15%
- aged 19 & 20: 2%

The age breakdown makes it possible to examine driver responses in accordance to age categories and identify distinctions on this basis. Notably, there were 289 respondents aged 14 to 15 years, 731 aged 16 to 17, and 197 aged 18-20. The results of these analyses will be published later this year in a full report and journal article.

An examination of license status revealed approximately half (50%) of respondents had learner permits, whereas 31% had an intermediate license (e.g., provisional, probationary, junior, restricted), and 19% had a full license. When queried about their frequency of driving, nearly one-half (47%) of respondents drove passenger vehicles daily or almost every day, 21% drove a few days a week, and 12% drove just a few days a month. In addition, 21% who reported driving less than once a month were eliminated from the analyses.

When asked about the two main purposes of their driving, 85% of the 1,217 respondents cited driving for school-related activities, whereas only one-third (38%) indicated driving to hang out with friends. A comparable one-third (35%) noted they drove for work and just 8% indicated they drove to go to the mall/movies. Participants were also asked what type of roads they primarily used. Driving on rural roads was reported by nearly half (45%) of respondents, and slightly more than one-quarter (27%) reported using city roads. Much smaller proportions reported traveling on suburban streets (15%), and 12% on the highway/interstate.

Almost all respondents (95%) reported owning or using a smartphone or similar device. In addition, a large majority (90%) reported they most frequently interacted with visual content platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok.

## Phone use while driving

Among the 1,124 respondents answering this question, nearly two-thirds (60%) of them had not used or interacted with their device while driving in the past 30 days. However, a disconcerting 35% (n=398) of them had. The still large number of respondents who reported using their smart device while driving is a red flag and suggests a lack of either awareness or concern about the dangers of using a smart device while driving. The results do indicate more attention to and education about distracted driving is necessary, especially since 79% of these respondents did not even have a full license. This suggests they were likely novice drivers with relatively limited driving experience.



When asked which hands-free phone features they most often used, approximately half of them (51%; n=189) identified talk-to-text features like Bluetooth as the most common feature. Slightly more than one-quarter (28%) of respondents reported using Apple Car Play/Android Auto. More concerning, approximately one in six (16%) teens said they used handheld devices while driving.

It is encouraging that larger proportions of teens appear to be relying on hands-free usage of their devices, however, the risk and cognitive load associated with some hands-free tasks can be high and teens may not recognize this distinction. In other words, it is important that teens understand some of the limitations and dangers of hands-free technology as well as the effect of higher cognitive load tasks on their field of view and perception reaction times.

## Risky behaviors

Respondents answered how often in the past 30 days they used their devices for tasks while driving, and the responses were cause for concern. These results reflect only those respondents (n=398) who had indicated they interacted with their phone while driving in the past 30 days. Of these, 361 answered the specific question about texting while driving. Among this group, approximately half (50%) reported texting while driving at least a few days a week or more frequently. In fact, more than one-quarter (28%) reported doing so every day or almost every day. Moreover, nearly two-thirds (61%) indicated they engaged in phone calls daily/almost daily or a few times a week, among which about 30% did so regularly. Finally, approximately one-third (37%) of respondents reported using their navigation system at least a few days a week or every day/almost every day.

With respect to the frequency of using their phone in the past 30 days, more respondents (56%) reported never or rarely watching content while driving. An even larger proportion (58%), indicated they never or rarely typed, posted or shared content while driving. Conversely, 65% of respondents reported they always/almost always or at least sometimes listened to content, an activity that generally poses less risk compared to other types of tasks.

However, a substantial minority of respondents (average n=181) to this group of questions reported they engaged daily or almost daily in higher-risk tasks such as watching content (23%), typing or posting content (18%), reading content (16%), and sharing content (12%). Notably, these results indicate almost half of the respondents engaged in these activities at least some of the time and far too many teens use their devices for various purposes while driving.

Respondents were queried about their perceptions of danger associated with a variety of distracting activities and asked to select their top three dangerous activities while driving. The five activities they perceived to be the most distracting were texting (n=889), social media use (n=751), taking selfies (n=677), handheld phone use (n=534), and reaching for the phone (n=531). Other types of tasks deemed to be less dangerous included applying makeup and personal grooming.

On the other hand, when considering the least dangerous distracted driving activities, the top answers were using navigation/GPS (n=884), excessively loud music (n=700), eating or drinking (n=641), phone calls (607) and talking/laughing/looking at passengers (n=558). Most notably, these findings suggest teens substantially underestimate the complexity or cognitive load associated with navigation tasks, and the differences between the length, intensity and emotional demands of some phone calls compared to others.

Collectively, these results indicate more work is needed to address perceptions that ancillary activities, particularly those involving hands-free devices, have little to no risk associated with them, particularly for young drivers who are gaining experience on the road. As a group of neophyte drivers, they are generally less likely and/or slower to recognize and anticipate hazards during the learning to drive process.

## Other risk-taking behaviors

Respondents were also asked about the other types of risks they may take on the road, including speeding, seatbelt use, and impairment. Driving more than five miles per hour over the limit was most common with 45% of them admitting to always or often doing this and almost one-third (30%) admitting to this behavior sometimes. When asked about the frequency of driving more than ten miles per hour over the limit, there was a precipitous but still unacceptable drop where 17% admitted to always or often taking this risk, and an additional 30% admitting to doing so at least sometimes. In other words, regularly engaging in speeding was more prevalent than regular use of an electronic device while driving. Driving while tired or drowsy was reported by about one-third (37%) of respondents at least sometimes, and about one-in-ten (11%) drivers did so always or often.

With respect to seatbelt use, among 960 respondents, a large majority (81%) reported they always wear their seatbelt. However, this means 19% of respondents infrequently or even never wore their seatbelt which is cause for concern given this group of drivers face greater risk of crash involvement than adult drivers.

There is clear evidence in this survey that prevention messaging related to other types of road risks has been effective with youth, in combination with graduated driver licensing restrictions. To this end, a large majority of respondents reported never driving after consuming alcohol (97%) or using drugs including cannabis (96%). Similarly, they also reported they never engaged in aggressive driving (i.e., tailgating, not using signal for lane changing) or doing stunts or street racing (81%, 91% respectively). These results can also provide a foundation for prevention messaging based on social norming approaches which leverage the positive choices and beliefs of peer groups to influence behavioral change.

While comparatively small proportions of respondents did report engaging in these risks, it may suggest those teens who do engage in these forms of risk-taking possess different characteristics and perhaps may benefit from more personally relevant approaches to prevention messaging.

## Motivators

Respondents were asked to rank their top two out of seven reasons for using a smartphone or smart device while driving with 1 being most important and 7 least important. The top ranked reason was that parents would be upset if they did not answer their call (3.0). Other top reasons included not wanting to wait or pull over (3.4) and communicating with friends (3.7). Lesser reasons included missing out on something important (3.9), boredom or loneliness (4.2), it's fun and there is little or no risk to personal safety (4.8).

Respondents were also asked whether they were confident in their ability to drive safely while using a smartphone. Approximately one-half (50%) of respondents reported they were confident or very confident in their ability whereas approximately one-third (32%) reported they were not confident. The remaining 18% indicated they were not sure as to their confidence.

Three main themes emerged when respondents were queried about why they felt confident using their phones while driving. The first major theme that

emerged among almost half of respondents (47%) emphasized their confidence was associated with their perceived sense of control and level of situational awareness, referencing their use of hands-free, voice-to-text, or Bluetooth features to minimize distraction. Respondents described deliberately managing when and how they used their phones, often limiting it to what they perceived as safe moments, such as at red lights or lower risk driving conditions. Ideas commonly expressed included, *I only glance for a second, I'm always aware of my surroundings, and I know the right times to use my phone*. In addition, other peripheral themes pertained to limiting voice-activated phone use, slowing down while using a phone reduces risk, and simply general confidence. However, dominant narratives remained rooted in experiences to date, habits which had been formed, and perceived control.



The second theme identified by more than one-third of respondents (36%) pertained to confidence based on their driving experience and skill, expressing the belief that their hours behind the wheel, quick reactions, and lack of involvement in a crash made them capable of managing distractions. Several respondents made reference to *not having had a crash, being familiar with the roads they drive, having driven for a few years, and being good at paying attention or being a good driver*.

The final theme major theme expressed by almost one-fifth (17%) of respondents centered on perceptions of themselves as skilled multitaskers and the frequency of this behavior behind the wheel. Respondents often described *phone use as something they had become accustomed to, making statements such as I'm good at multitasking and I can type without looking at my phone*. These drivers appear to equate familiarity with confidence and perhaps fail to recognize the distinctions

in complexity between different types or road environments, different volumes of road traffic, or different types of tasks.

Research is needed to further examine how teens assess the safety of the road environment, their competency with respect to hazard perception, as well as the risks associated with the tasks they choose to engage in while driving. Answers to these questions can inform educational strategies for youth to ensure they can accurately judge risks when they are driving. Debunking the multitasking myth is a challenging prospect but can be more easily accomplished when there are opportunities through educational outreach for drivers to experience the science of distraction and its effects on the ability to focus on the driving task while in a safe environment. The use of driver simulation technologies could be helpful in demonstrating and experiencing how drivers can be distracted by different activities and conditions.

Answers from teen respondents (n=1,761; teens could provide up to two responses each) also revealed that parental guidance and peer influences play a crucial role in shaping their driving behaviors. When asked to pick the top two influencers of their driving choices, nearly half of respondents (45%) pointed to parents, followed by 23% who indicated friends. Comparatively, 19% selected the police or licensing agency, and just 11% reported someone who was severely injured or lost a family member. Surprisingly, only 2% of respondents indicated celebrities/influencers impacted their driving behaviors.

When asked how often parents, guardians or other adults used smartphones while driving, almost half (49%) of respondents reported this occurred at least sometimes with more than one-third (34%) reporting their parents used it always, almost always, or at least half of the time. Slightly smaller proportions (44%) of teens reported cell phone use among their friends sometimes and a similarly smaller proportion (27%) reported use by peers as always, almost always, or at least half of the time. These responses underscore the importance of educating parents about how their choices behind the wheel influence the choices their young drivers are likely to make, beginning at a very young age. It also demonstrates the need for parents to play an active role as their teens learn to drive to help shape safe choices.



As revealed by other surveys of adult drivers (Cox et al., 2023), factors related to awareness that drivers could injure or kill themselves or someone close to them were highly motivating in terms of behavior change. In this survey, among a total of 1,217 respondents the top three factors that would motivate them to stop using their smartphone while driving were the loss of someone's life (46%), injury to others (43%), and loss of one's own life (34%). Other influences of their behavior that were perceived to be somewhat motivating, ranked in descending order, include costs associated with vehicle damage or insurance (29%), license suspension (25%), and injury to self (24%). Getting into trouble and disapproval from friends were only considered motivating by just a few respondents. These results suggest the importance of parents and driver educators spending time with young people discussing the consequences of dangerous choices. This may include helping them think through the potential implications and reality of what those consequences mean for their families, school, friends, career options, and future opportunities.

### Strategies & peer influence

Respondents were asked about what strategies and/or technologies they've used to prevent distracted driving. Strategies reportedly used by teen drivers included: more than half (56%) of respondents used the *Do Not Disturb* feature on their phone, 41% put the smartphone/smart device out of reach or gave it to a passenger to answer, 41% turned down the music because they felt it was too loud while driving, 38% switched the smartphone to silent, and 37% told passengers *don't bug them* or to *settle down* so they could focus on driving. More than two-thirds (69%) of teens had consistently or even sometimes

asked another driver to put down their phone or not use it while driving.

Respondents were also asked about whether they thought their friends or social group believed it's okay to use a smartphone while driving. Positively, almost half of respondents (49%) reported they believed just a few or none of their peers believed it was okay to use their phone and drive, whereas a small minority (16%) believed it was okay.

More specifically, responses were as follows:

- all of them 5%
- most of them 11%
- some of them 18%
- a few of them 26%
- none of them 23%
- don't know 18%

So, on one hand, there is certainly potential to begin to leverage social norming approaches to change behavior, but on the other hand more concerted and targeted education will be needed for those who misunderstand the risks associated with various forms of distraction.

## Speaking up

When respondents were asked whether anyone had asked them to stop using their smartphone, a majority (78%) of respondents reported no one had asked them to stop. Conversely, when asked whether they had spoken-up or asked another driver not to use their smartphone while driving, approximately one-third (31%) admitted they had never asked another driver to stop using their device. Somewhat similar proportions reported they had sometimes asked a driver not to use their phone (37%) and they had spoken up always, most of the time, or at least half the time (32%).

These results indicating most respondents had not been asked by passengers to stop using their phone while driving, and only a minority reported speaking up frequently, suggests peer pressure may be a barrier to teens speaking up about their safety. Increasing the knowledge base around the associated risks of these behaviors and providing teens with simple facts, tips, and even sample phrases which they could practice to encourage drivers to stop risky behaviors could make it easier for them to speak up.

## Conclusions

Among teen drivers who participated in the survey, nearly half of them had an instructional/ learners permit and the other half had either a full license or intermediate license (e.g., provisional, probationary, restricted). Nearly half of the respondents drove daily or almost daily. Primary purposes for driving that were identified by teens included mostly driving to school/extracurricular activities/sports practices (85%) and fewer involved going to work (35%) or hanging out with friends (37%). The types of roads primarily traveled indicated 45% drove on rural roads and 43% drove on city or suburban streets. Nearly all respondents owned or used a smartphone, smartwatch, or other smart device which was most frequently used to access visual content like Snapchat, Instagram, or TikTok. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (60%) had not used or interacted with their device while driving in the past 30 days, but a disconcerting 35% had done so.

Positively, the survey revealed teens understand the importance of not driving while impaired, the importance of wearing a seatbelt, and avoiding aggressive driving maneuvers, or engaging in street racing or other driving antics for show. These results suggest that different types of messaging about the dangers of these behaviors have been effective. Further, there did seem to be at least some understanding of strategies to use to avoid device usage (i.e., using do not disturb feature, put device out of reach).



The survey brought to light the important role parents, guardians, or other adults play in instilling safe driving habits. Adult role models were by far the most influential on driving/riding choices. Unfortunately, survey respondents disclosed that



83% of their role models used their smart device at least sometimes while driving. Further, the most important reason teens gave for using their device while driving was they were concerned their parents would be upset if they did not answer their call. These responses stress the importance of adult role models not only teaching or emphasizing safe driving but also consistently modeling these behaviors. Developing messaging that is intended for adults with emphasis on how their behaviors and attitudes influence teens' safe driving as well as providing instruction about how to deliver messages to teens about the dangers of smartphone use is recommended.

Another interesting finding from the survey was the inconsistent role peers seem to play in influencing the use of smart devices while driving. The respondents indicated that at least some of their friends (34%) believed it is okay to use a device while driving, and a majority (seven in ten) of their peers used a device at least sometimes. More than three-quarters of respondents reported that no one had ever asked them to stop using their device and nearly one-third admitted they had never asked another driver to stop.

Conversely, when asked who had the most influence on their driving/riding choices, their friends or social group were a distant second to their parents or guardians, and the disapproval of peers was not considered a top reason not to use a smart device while driving. More concern was associated with death of another and injury to another. Further, small proportions of respondents indicated police, licensing authorities, or celebrities and online influencers were an important messenger.

However, these findings do suggest efforts to create prevention messaging and strategies specifically for teens and pre-teens to use are essential. Empowering teens to speak up to peer influences about the risks of distracted driving can build confidence and consistency.

At the same time, it warrants mentioning that some of these responses are, in fact, concerning, despite the fact the population of respondents largely consists of those who have chosen to participate in youth safety and education programs. Their participation would suggest these teens may be more inclined to self-select for safety (i.e., to take fewer risks and be more safety-conscious) than their peers who do not participate in these types of

programs. In other words, young drivers who do not choose to participate in such educational or youth safety programs are perhaps much more inclined to be risk-takers.

Driver education programs should ensure their instruction and messaging includes an emphasis on the dangers of smartphone use while driving. The development of driver simulation technology that allows for the hands-on experience related to distraction generally and smartphone use specifically should also be considered.

Although not directly related to device usage, speeding at least five miles per hour over the limit was prevalent among survey takers. This risk is most concerning if speeding is coupled with one or more distracted driving behaviors.

The survey results indicate there is much more work to be done related to preventing distracted driving behaviors among teen drivers. In particular, new insights into the types of distracting behaviors which are most prevalent, and the reasons for engaging in them can provide much-needed direction to inform messaging. In addition, top motivators and influencers can help shape delivery mechanisms and strategies. Any campaigns to address this issue will need to consider a multi-pronged approach directed at pre-drivers, early drivers, and involve individuals who have the greatest influence over their choices on the road.

## References

Cox, A. E., Cicchino, J. B., Reagan, I. J., & Zubay, D. S. (2023). Prevalence of distracted driving by driver characteristics in the United States. *Journal of Safety Research*, 86, 346–356. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsr.2023.07.013>

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The **National Distracted Driving Coalition (NDDC)** was formed in March 2021 to address distracted driving, which is a contributing factor to road deaths and injuries. This road safety issue is a priority concern shared by many organizations across many sectors. A diverse cross-section of entities, representing academia, non-profits, government, advocacy, and industries, including insurance, transportation, automotive and technology, have come together to create a National Action Plan to tackle this important issue. Vist [usnddc.org](https://usnddc.org)



The mission of the **Traffic Injury Research Foundation USA, Inc. (TIRF USA)** is to develop and share the knowledge that saves – preventing injuries and loss of life on American roads, reducing related social, health and insurance costs, and safeguarding productivity. TIRF USA is an independent road safety research institute that obtained 501(c)3 non-profit status in the US in 2014. Vist [turf.us](https://turf.us)



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