NATIONAL DISTRACTED DRIVING COALITION

Teen Smartphone Use While Driving: Age Comparisons of Risky Behaviors, Perceptions & Attitudes | Summary

February 2026

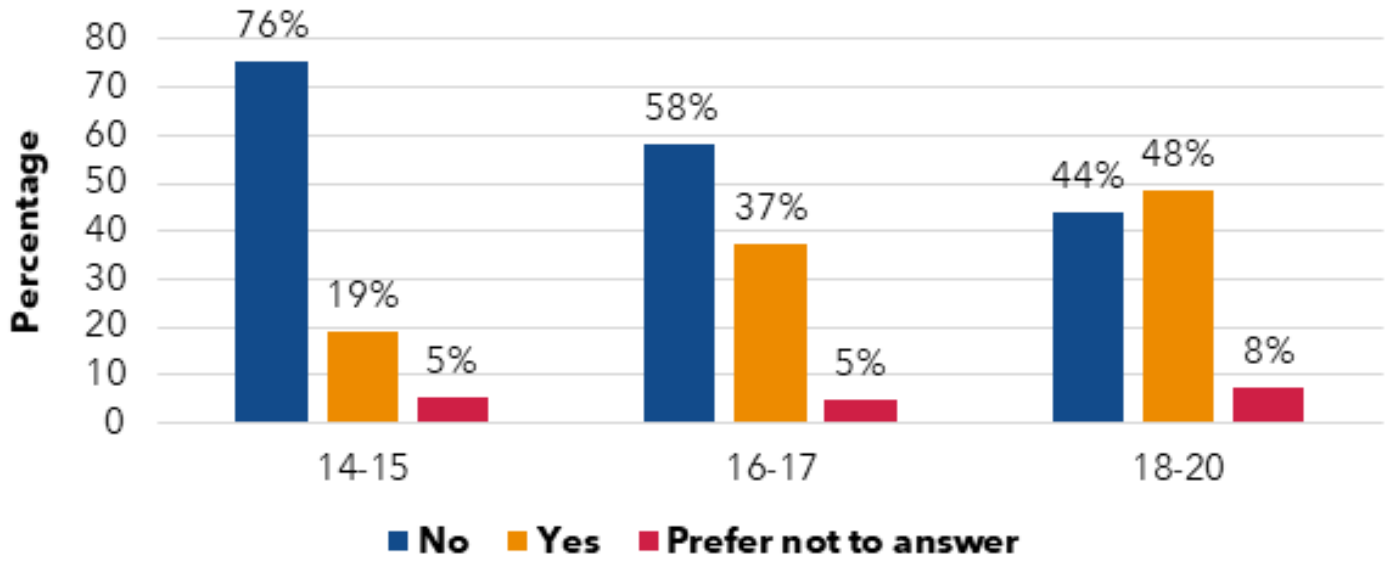
A total of 1,217 youth from 26 U.S. states took part in a 2025 survey by the **Traffic Injury Research Foundation USA, Inc.**, in partnership with the **National Distracted Driving Coalition (NDDC)** and with support from **State Farm®**. The objective of this initiative was to understand how teens aged 14-20 use smartphones while driving and what factors play a role in this behavior.

These findings offer important insights for parents/guardians and educators supporting teens as they learn to drive. In addition to driver education, everyday experiences and social influences shape driving habits. Teens learn from behavior adults' model as well as what friends believe and do. These behaviors begin to feel normal rather quickly once they acquire some basic driving experience. In other words, engaging in secondary non-driving tasks can start early and rapidly become ingrained as teens gain independence, especially if parents/guardians are modeling them.

While one-third of teen respondents admitted using their phone while driving, the types of tasks varied with age in a clear pattern. The youngest teen drivers were less likely to use their phone, but still almost 20% reported doing so, whereas the proportion increased to more than one-third (37%) of 16-17-year-olds and almost half (48%) of 18-19-year-olds. At the same time, non-use declined with age (76% → 58%→44% respectively). These age differences were statistically significant ($p<0.001$), meaning the pattern is unlikely due to chance.

Distracted driving is increasingly normalized among young drivers, with crash risk linked to attention lapses rather than environmental factors.

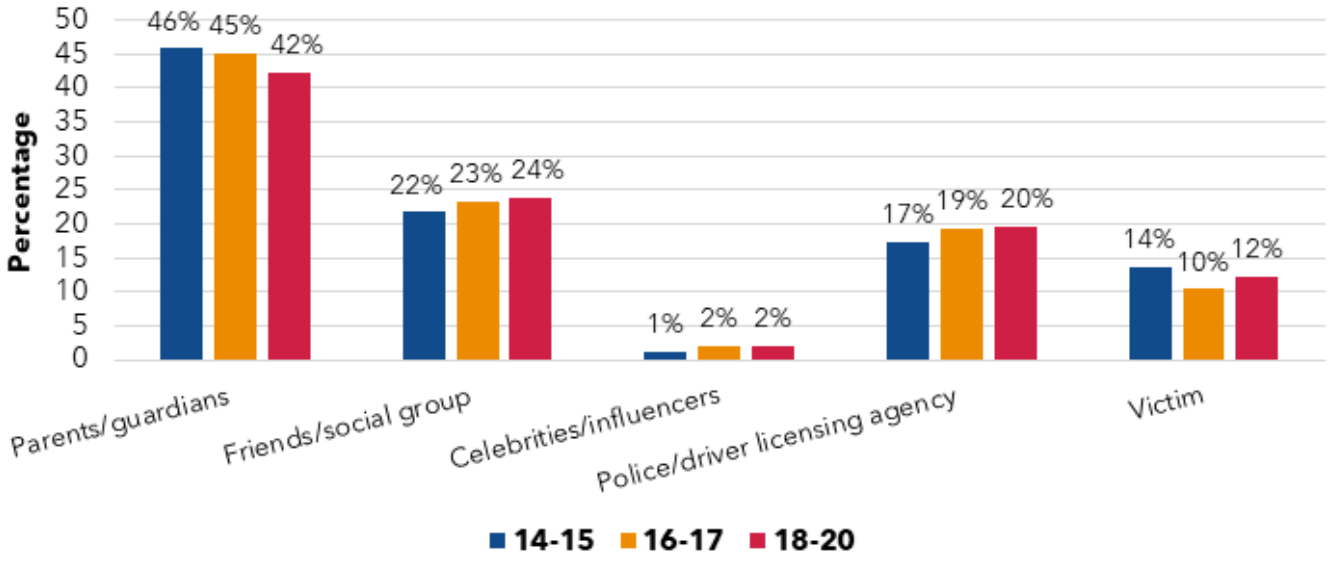
Self-reported smartphone use while driving in the past 30 days by age group



What more schools & youth programs should know

- Distraction is linked with broader risk-taking (it rarely happens in isolation). Teens who used smartphones while driving were significantly more likely to engage in speeding, aggressive driving, and driving while tired/drowsy. In addition, more than one-quarter (27%) of teens across all ages who used smartphones while driving were more likely to not wear their seatbelt at least sometimes. While this latter finding was not significant, it is still concerning.
- Perceptions of risk associated with the use of navigation and GPS was ranked lowest across all age groups despite the substantial cognitive demands associated with using these features. At the same time, the prevalence of use of navigation/GPS also increased with age.
- Parents/guardians were identified as having the greatest influence on driving behavior across all age groups, declining slightly from 46% among 14-15-year-olds to 42% among 18-20-year-olds. Friends and peers ranked second (22%→ 24% with age) as influencers of behavior. Police/licensing agencies became slightly more influential with age (17% → 20%) while celebrities and social media influencers had negligible impact (1-2%).
- Peer influence played an important role in shaping perceptions about acceptable behaviors. Teens with peers who approved of smartphone use while driving were nearly three times more likely to drive distracted. In addition, simply observing friends use phones while driving also increased the likelihood teens would do it.
- The most prevalent forms of distraction looked different by age (so prevention should too). Visual/media distractions (e.g., watching/reading/creating content) were more common among teens aged 14-15, while those aged 18-20 reported more engagement with navigation/GPS and exhibited higher overall phone-related distraction.

Top influencers on driving or riding choices



How to integrate these results into schools & youth programs

Education about distraction needs to be framed as an attention-management issue and not just a rule about texting while driving. Driving itself is a complex task involving visual, manual and cognitive skills. Technology and other sources of distraction also rely on these same skills. This competition for mental capacity and focus across different yet simultaneous tasks can result in much greater demands, leading drivers (of any age) to become overwhelmed with information and not enough mental capacity to activate those skills consistently. In short, humans are built to process one task at a time (so no, you aren't good at multitasking no matter your age). Results revealed teens underestimated the risk not only of manual tasks but in particular, everyday tasks like navigation or managing music as well as cognitive tasks generally. This framing can help teens understand why distraction is dangerous as opposed to simply telling them it is dangerous.

Schools and youth programs can help by teaching practical routines (e.g., set navigation before moving, use *Do Not Disturb* while driving, put the phone out of reach) and reinforcing that safe driving skills take time to build. Many teens believed two to three years of limited driving qualified them as experienced. But the time needed to become a good driver is actually measured in decades. It equally important to reinforce that mitigation strategies are lifelong safety measures.

Parents and guardians are by far the most important influence on driving behavior however the role of peer approval increases with age. More concerningly, more than 80% of teen respondents acknowledged parents/ guardians who most frequently drove them used their phone while driving at least sometimes. Parents and educators also need to recognize the adoption of engagement in distracting behaviors can become normalised in a relatively short window between the ages of 14-18.

Takeaways

Teens need to understand the breadth and scope of experience needed to become a safe driver and it is important for parents/guardians to qualify how many years behind the wheel must be accumulated to truly become a safe driver (measured in decades). Both roadways and vehicles are forgiving of driving errors. In other words, not being crash-involved doesn't make you a good driver, it makes you lucky the *unexpected* didn't happen when you made a mistake because you were distracted.

Teens need a better understanding of the complexity of the driving task and ways that performing different types of secondary tasks can contribute to errors and increase crash risk. Teens ranked GPS/navigation as low-risk, yet any experienced driver will tell you it is not. Inviting teens to multitask in a safe environment by

combining a simple physical task such as catching coloured beanbags and sorting them while answering simple math, spelling or memory questions can help to illustrate how the brain has to shift gears across tasks as well as how the performance of both tasks degrades. In other words, teens need to experience and observe errors that occur as a result of distraction so they can apply this knowledge to their real-world driving environment.

Download the full report: **https://bit.ly/Youth-Distracted-Driving-Survey**

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. Visit **usnddc.org**

NATIONAL DISTRACTED DRIVING COALITION

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. Visit **tirf.us**

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