

Fewer Americans like to drive, survey shows

# Americans and Their Cars: Is the Romance on the Skids?

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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A Social Trends Report

## Americans and Their Cars: Is the Romance on the Skids?

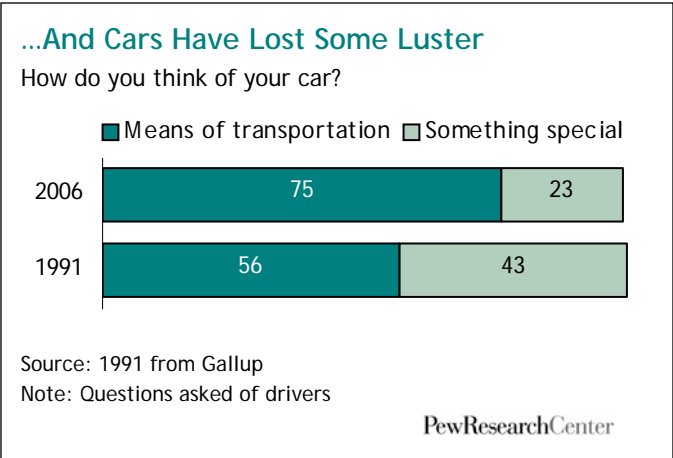
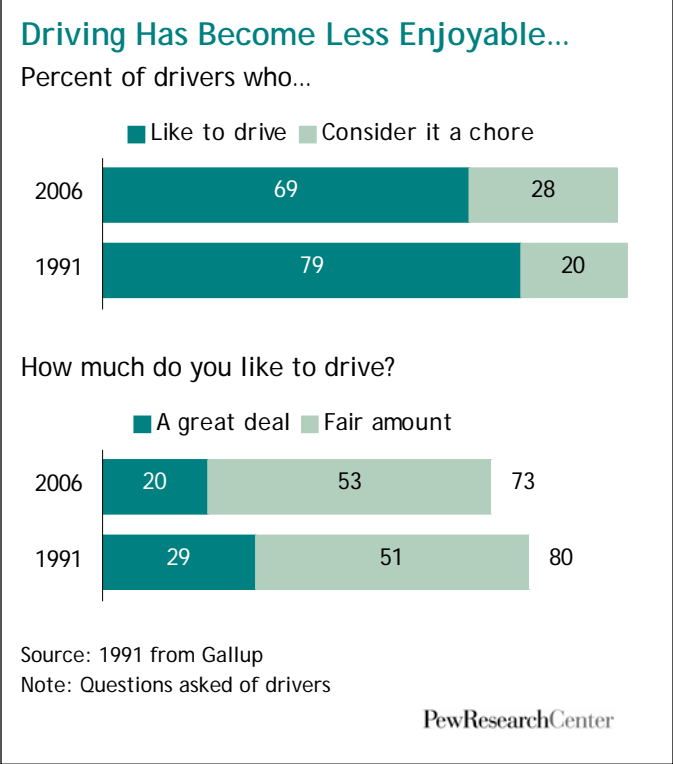
Any nation with more passenger vehicles than licensed drivers has a pretty serious love affair with the automobile. But the romance seems to be cooling off a bit—a casualty of its own intensity.

Today 69% of American drivers say they like to drive, down from 79% in a 1991 Gallup survey. And just 23% say they consider their car “something special—more than just a way to get around,” barely half of the 43% who felt this way in 1991.

The biggest reason for the cooling of the affair isn’t the recent spike in gas prices. Rather, it appears to be the result of a longer term trend—the growing hassle of traffic congestion, according to a Pew Research Center telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,182 adults (including 1,048 drivers) conducted from June 20 through July 16, 2006.

When asked whether they like to drive or consider it a chore, 69% of drivers in the Pew survey said the former, while 28% said the latter. When the “chore” respondents were asked why they felt this way, traffic congestion (23%) and “other drivers” (14%) topped the list of reasons. Just 3% cited the expense.

Among the still sizable majority who say they like to drive, the biggest reasons offered were the relaxation (21%), the scenery (19%), the freedom (14%) and the ability to get around (12%).

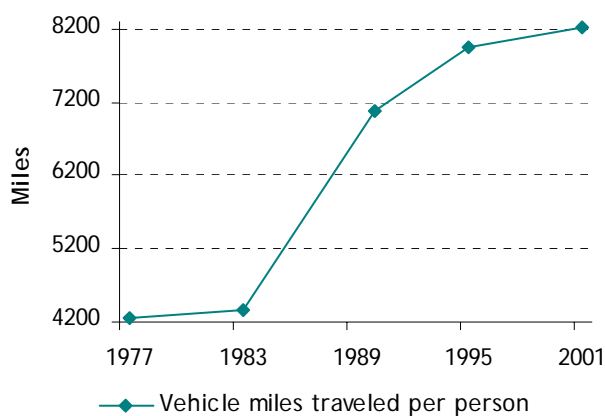


## A Plague of Traffic

Trends from the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics and the National Center for Transit Research show why, for a growing number of Americans, cars and driving seem to have become too-much-of-a-good-thing.

The National Household Travel Survey found in 2001 that, for the first time since such studies have been conducted, there were more personal vehicles (204 million) than licensed drivers (191 million) in this country. With all those cars, trucks, minivans and SUVs at their disposal, Americans have been making more trips and traveling more miles, thereby generating more of the very thing that has made them enjoy driving less – traffic jams.<sup>1</sup> From 1991 to 2003, the amount of time per year that the typical American spent stuck in traffic grew by 56%, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

### Americans Are Driving More Miles...



Source: Center for Urban Transportation Research. Results from the 2001 National Household Travel Survey; earlier years from the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey. More recent data not yet available.

### ...And Spending More Time in Traffic Jams

	1991	2003	Percentage increase
Average annual hours of traffic delay per person	16 hrs	25 hrs	+56%

Source: Bureau of Transportation Statistics

## The Car: Where Life Happens

However, despite the growing hassles of traffic, many drivers have strong feelings of intimacy toward their cars – 31%, for example, say they think of their car as having a personality. And despite the high price of gas, more than a quarter (27%) say they went driving “just for the fun of it” in the past week.

Moreover, most people see driving as a chance to take care of many of the other routines and amusements of daily living. Here is a (slightly scary) list of things people report having done in the past year while they were behind the wheel:

- More than two-thirds (68%) of drivers say they have sung aloud while driving.
- Roughly six-in-ten (58%) have talked on a handheld phone while driving.
- More than four-in-ten (41%) have eaten a meal while driving.
- One-in-six (16%) have combed their hair or applied makeup while driving.

<sup>1</sup> Polzin, Steven E. 2006. “The Case for Moderate Growth in Vehicle Miles of Travel: A Critical Juncture in U.S. Travel Behavior Trends” Report prepared for the U.S. Department of Transportation.  
<http://www.cutr.usf.edu/pdf/The%20Case%20for%20Moderate%20Growth%20in%20VMT-%202006%20Final.pdf>

- Some 6% have read a paper, book or magazine while driving.
- Some 6% have fallen asleep while driving.
- And 38% have cursed at another driver.

## I. Who Likes to Drive, Who Doesn't, and Why

When asked whether they like to drive or consider it a chore, Americans by a better than two-to-one margin (69%-28%) say they like to drive. However, this ratio was even more lopsided 15 years ago – 79% to 20%. Also, only a fifth of American drivers today report that they like to drive “a great deal,” down from 29% who said this in the 1991 survey by Gallup.

This decline over the past 15 years in enjoyment of driving has occurred among men and women, young and old, as well as in all regions of the country. Those in the lowest income brackets are more likely than others to describe driving as a chore, and among this group this view has grown from 14% in 1991 to 36% today. People who rack up the most miles on their odometers tend to be the most inclined to say they like to drive, but the feeling that driving is a chore has grown since 1991 among heavy as well as light travelers.

What is it about driving that Americans like and don't like? When asked to put their reasons in their own words, respondents who like to drive most often cited being alone and getting time to think or relax (21%) and being able see new sights and scenery (19%). Some drivers specifically mentioned the sense of freedom or independence while driving (14%) and others talked about the control over when and where to go that comes with driving compared with other forms of transportation (9%). Another 12% of responses suggested a more utilitarian appreciation for just being able to get around.

Women are more likely than men to cite relaxation and quiet time as the reason they enjoy driving, while men are more prone to cite the scenery and seeing new sights.

Among those who consider driving a chore, the most common reason cited was traffic congestion (23% of responses) followed by complaints about the behavior of those pesky humans who share the roadways (14%), the drudgery of running errands or commuting to work

### We Like to Drive Because...

	%
Time to be alone/quiet time	21
Scenery/new sights/get away	19
Freedom/independence	14
Way to get around	12
Can pick up and go	9
Get out of the house	6
Specifics about the car	5
Just like to drive	4
Being on the road/cruising	3
Music/singing/radio	3
Comfortable	1
Other	6
None	1
Don't know	3

Note: Question asked of 521 drivers who report liking to drive. Responses total to more than 100% due to multiple responses to this open-ended question.

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### We Consider Driving a Chore Because...

	%
Traffic/congestion	23
Other drivers	14
Commuting/going to work	10
Running errands	10
Just don't like to drive	8
Specifics of the car/conditions	5
Waste of time	5
Tiring	4
Stressful	3
Expense/gas prices	3
Have to focus/concentrate	3
Age and health reasons	2
Do it too much	2
It's boring	1
Other	10
None	1
Don't know	3

Question asked of 200 drivers who report driving is a chore. Responses total to more than 100% due to multiple responses to this open-ended question.

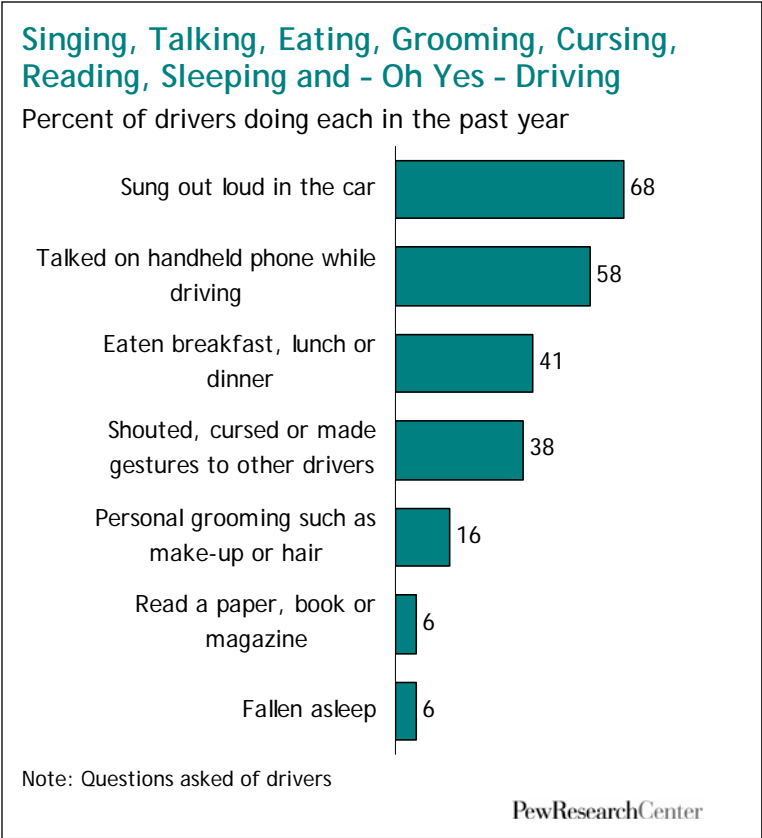
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(10% each) and a laundry list of other complaints.

Overall, there is not much difference across socio demographic groups in enjoyment of driving. Men and women are about equally likely to consider driving a chore and to say they like to drive “a great deal.” Similarly, there are no significant differences on these measures for residents of urban, suburban, rural areas or regions of the country. Even the differences by age are modest; adults under age 30 are a bit more enthusiastic about driving, with 82% saying they like to drive a fair amount or a great deal, compared with 70% to 73% among those in older age brackets.

**II. Things We Do While Driving**

As they spend more and more time in their cars, Americans report that they do an impressive – perhaps even scary - range of activities while driving. Nearly seven-in-ten drivers (68%) use their time behind the wheel to sing out loud. About six-in-ten (58%) report talking on a handheld phone while driving, a practice that some states have outlawed due to safety concerns. Roughly four-in-ten (41%) say they have eaten a meal while driving and nearly as many (38%) report having shouted or cursed at other drivers in the past year. Other behaviors are less common—16% of drivers have done some personal grooming while driving, 6% have combined reading and driving and 6% have fallen asleep behind the wheel in the past year.



Drivers in the younger age categories (18 to 49 years) are more likely than older drivers to combine driving with singing, phone calls, eating, and cursing at other drivers. And female drivers are more likely than male drivers to break into song or take care of personal grooming . Meantime, drivers in the northeast are more likely to report cursing at other drivers than are those in other regions.

Despite the dip in enthusiasm for driving, and even with gas prices hovering around \$3 a gallon, more than a quarter (27%) of all drivers (24% of all Americans) say they have gone driving “just for the fun of it” in the past week. Younger adults are more likely than older ones to have done so. Also, there’s more joy riding in rural areas than in cities or suburbs. Men and women are about equally likely to have done some driving just for the fun of it. Not surprisingly, those who like driving are more likely than those who consider it a chore to have done this kind of recreational driving.

### Gone for Joy Ride?

Have you gone driving just for the fun of it in the past week, or haven’t you done this?

	Yes	No	Don’t know	N
	%	%	%	
All drivers	27	73	*=100	1048
<b>Gender</b>				
Men	30	70	0=100	472
Women	25	75	*=100	576
<b>Age</b>				
18-29	36	64	0=100	128
30-49	28	72	0=100	395
50-64	25	74	1=100	284
65 and older	20	80	0=100	215
<b>Locality</b>				
Urban	25	75	*=100	312
Suburban	26	74	0=100	505
Rural	34	66	0=100	231
<b>Like to Drive?</b>				
Like to drive	34	66	*=100	724
Consider it a chore	13	87	0=100	288

Note: Question asked of drivers

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### III. Car Personality

Just as positive feelings about driving have cooled a bit since 1991, so too has the special relationship that drivers have with their cars. The number of drivers who say they think of their car as “something special—more than just a way to get around” has fallen by nearly half, to 23% now from 43% in the 1991 Gallup survey.

This drop-off occurred about equally among all major socio demographic groups of drivers – including men and women, older and younger, more and less affluent—and in all regions of the country.

At the same time, however, about three-in-ten (31%) drivers report they at least sometimes think of their car as having a personality of its own.

There are virtually no differences between men and women on this question, but there are some variances by age. Some 41% of 18-to-29 year olds say their car has a personality, while just 25% of those ages 65 and older agree.

Also, just under three-in-ten (28%) drivers say they can usually tell what a person is like from the kind of car he or she drives, a figure that is on par with drivers’ assessments in the 1991 survey. Of course, cars aren’t the only inanimate window into the personality of humans. When asked to assess whether a person’s car, home or clothing tells the most about what that person is like, respondents ranked the car a distant third -- at just 7%. Home was the big winner, with 54% saying it revealed the most about its owner, while 24% said that about clothing.

Cars No Longer Quite So Special			
	1991	2006	Difference
	%	%	
<b>How do you think of your car?</b>			
Means of transportation	56	75	+19
Something special	43	23	-20
Don't know	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	+1
	100	100	

Source: 1991 from Gallup  
 Note: Questions asked of drivers

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Car Got Attitude?	
Do you ever think of your car as having a personality of its own, or don't you think about your car this way?	
	2006
	%
Yes	31
No	68
Don't know	<u>1</u>
	100

Note: Question asked of drivers

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## About the Pew Social Trends Reports

The Pew social trends reports explore the behaviors and attitudes of Americans in key realms of their lives – family, community, health, finance, work and leisure. Reports analyze changes over time in social behaviors and probe for differences and similarities between key sub-groups in the population.

The surveys are conducted by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.

Survey reports are the result of the collaborative effort of the social trends staff, which consists of:

Paul Taylor, Executive Vice President  
Cary Funk, Senior Project Director  
Peyton Craighill, Project Director

## About the Survey

Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults, ages 18 years and older, living in continental U.S. telephone households.

- Interviews conducted June 20-July 16, 2006
- 1,182 interviews of which 1,048 were conducted with drivers.
- Margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for results based on the total sample at the 95% confidence level and 3.3 percentage points for results based on all drivers. The margin of sampling error is higher for results based on subgroups of respondents.

Survey interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

Bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias in the findings of opinion polls.

PEW SOCIAL TRENDS  
 FINAL TOPLINE  
 June 20 - July 16, 2006  
 N=1,182

QUESTIONS 1 THROUGH 6 HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.

ASK FORM 1 IN MODULE (FORM=1) [N=576]:

And a different kind of question.

Q.7F1 Which of these tells you the MOST about what someone is like? (READ; RANDOMIZE RESPONSE OPTIONS)?

7 Their car  
 54 Their home  
 24 Their clothing  
 15 Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)  
 100

ASK ALL IN MODULE [N=1182]:

Now, I have a few questions about driving.

Q.8 Do you drive a car or other vehicle, or don't you?

	<i>Gallup</i> <sup>2</sup> <u>March 1991</u>
87 Yes	89
13 No	11
* Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)	<u>0</u>
100	100

ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):

Q.9 About how many miles did you drive in the past 12 months? Would you say (READ)

BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:

27 Less than 5,000  
 28 5,000 to under 10,000  
 22 10,000 to under 15,000  
 11 15,000 to under 20,000  
 11 More than 20,000  
 1 Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)  
 100

ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):

Q.10 Do you think of your car as a means of transportation, or as something special—more than just a way to get around?

BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:

	<i>Gallup</i> <u>March 1991</u>
75 Means of transportation	56
23 Something special—more than just a way to get around	43
2 Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)	<u>1</u>
100	100

<sup>2</sup> The 1991 Gallup trend did not include the phrase "or don't you?"

**ASK FORM 2 IN MODULE (FORM=2):**Q.11F2 How often do you think you can tell what someone is like from the kind of car he or she drives? **(READ)**

All			<i>Gallup</i>
<u>Adults</u>	<u>Drivers</u>		Based on Drivers
			<u>March 1991</u>
9	9	Almost always	6
18	19	Usually	21
34	36	Sometimes	35
19	18	Not very often	22
15	14	Never	14
<u>5</u>	<u>4</u>	Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.--DO NOT READ)</b>	<u>2</u>
100	100		100
N=606	N=534		

**ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):**Q.12 Within the last 12 months, have you done any of the following while you were driving a car? **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE] IF NECESSARY:** Have you done this within the last 12 months while you were driving a car?<sup>3</sup>**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

	Yes	No	Don't know/ Refused
a. Personal grooming such as combing your hair or putting on make-up	16	84	0=100
March 1991 <i>Gallup</i>	28	72	*=100
b. Eaten breakfast, lunch or dinner	41	59	0=100
March 1991 <i>Gallup</i>	42	58	*=100
c. Read a newspaper, book or magazine	6	94	0=100
March 1991 <i>Gallup</i>	8	92	0=100
d. Fallen asleep	6	94	0=100
March 1991 <i>Gallup</i>	7	93	0=100
e. Shouted, cursed or made gestures to other drivers	38	62	*=100
f. Talked on a handheld phone while driving	58	42	0=100
g. Sung out loud in the car	68	32	*=100

**ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):**

Q.13 Do you like to drive, or do you consider it a chore?

**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

	<i>Gallup</i>
	<u>March 1991</u>
69 Like to drive	79
28 Consider it a chore	20
<u>3</u> Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.--DO NOT READ)</b>	<u>1</u>
100	100

<sup>3</sup> The 1991 Gallup question was worded "Within the last twelve months, have you done any of the following while you were behind the wheel?"

Q.14 How much do you like to drive? **(READ)**

**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

	<i>Gallup</i> <u>March 1991</u>
20 A great deal	29
53 A fair amount	51
22 Not too much	16
4 Not at all	3
<u>1</u> Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.--DO NOT READ)</b>	<u>1</u>
100	100

Q.15 Have you gone driving just for the fun of it in the past week, or haven't you done this?

**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

27 Yes
73 No
<u>*</u> Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.--DO NOT READ)</b>
100

Q.16 Do you ever think of your car as having a personality of its own, or don't you think about your car this way?

**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

31 Yes
68 No
<u>1</u> Don't know/Refused <b>(VOL.--DO NOT READ)</b>
100

**QUESTIONS 17 AND 18 WERE ASKED JUNE 29 TO JULY 16 ONLY.****ASK IF Q13=1:**

- Q.17 You mentioned that you like to drive. What is it about driving that you like? [**OPEN END; RECORD ANSWER; ACCEPT UP TO THREE RESPONSES**]

**BASED ON THOSE LIKE TO DRIVE [N=521]:**

- 21 Relax/time to be alone/quiet time/clear your mind/time to think/peaceful/unwind/soothing
- 19 Enjoy the scenery/see different and new things/explore/getting away from things/see countryside/adventure
- 14 Freedom/Independence
- 12 Way to get around/gets you where you want to go/from here to there/one spot to another
- 9 Can get up and go/pick up and go/being able to go when I want/flexibility to go where I want at any time/being in control
- 6 Get out of the house/out of the office/out in the open
- 5 Car performance/enjoy handling/making turns/speed/convertible/nice car
- 4 Just like to drive
- 3 Being on the road/cruising
- 3 Music/sing/play radio
- 1 Comfortable
- 1 None
- 6 Other miscellaneous
- 4 Don't know

*Responses total to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*

**ASK IF Q13=2:**

- Q.18 You mentioned that you consider driving a chore. What is it about driving that makes it a chore? [**OPEN END; RECORD ANSWER; ACCEPT UP TO THREE RESPONSES**]

**BASED ON THOSE WHO CONSIDER DRIVING A CHORE [N=200]:**

- 23 Traffic/congestion
- 14 Other drivers/too many people on the road/bad drivers/rude drivers
- 10 Commuting/don't like going to work/long commute to work/car pooling
- 10 Running errands/go places you don't want to go/driving others around
- 8 Just don't like to drive/only drive when I have to
- 5 Specific complaints/getting in the car/shifting gears/getting lost/road conditions
- 5 Time/waste of time
- 4 Tiring/uncomfortable/being in the same position for a long time
- 3 Stressful/makes me nervous
- 3 Expense/gas prices
- 3 Have to focus/concentrate/feel rushed
- 2 Age and health reasons
- 2 Do it too much/no one else drives me
- 1 Boring
- 1 None
- 10 Other miscellaneous
- 3 Don't know

*Responses total to more than 100% due to multiple responses.*

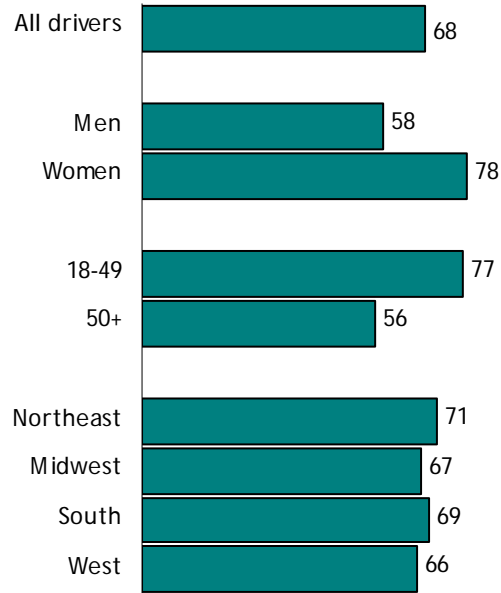
**QUESTION 19 HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.**

**NO QUESTION 20 OR 21**

**QUESTION 22 TO THE END HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.**

### Who's Warbling in the Car?

Percent of drivers who have sung out loud while driving in the past year

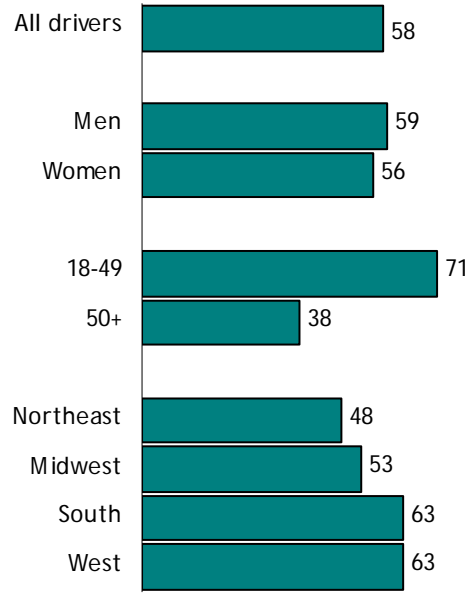


Note: Question asked of drivers

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### Cell Phones On the Go

Percent of drivers who have talked on a handheld phone while driving in the past year

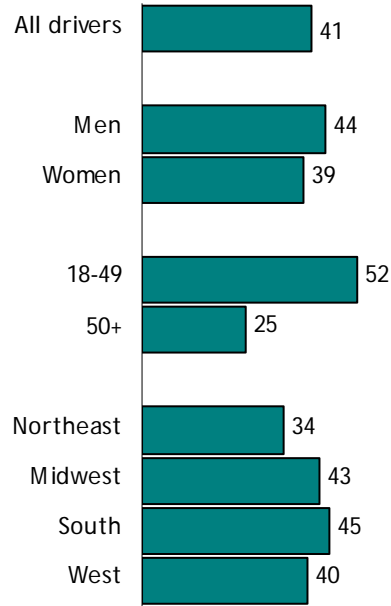


Note: Question asked of drivers

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### Meals on Wheels

Percent of drivers who have eaten breakfast, lunch, or dinner while driving in the past year



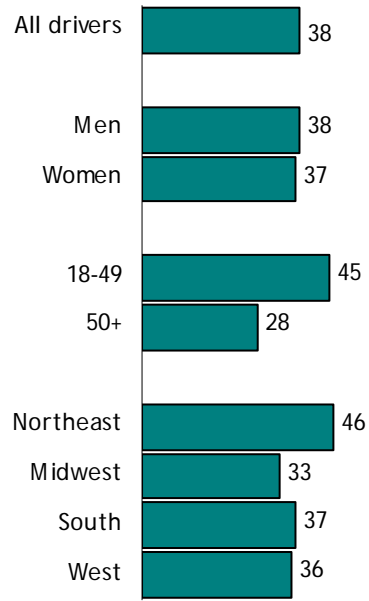
Note: Question asked of drivers

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### Road Rage

Percent of drivers who have shouted, cursed or made gestures to other drivers in the past year

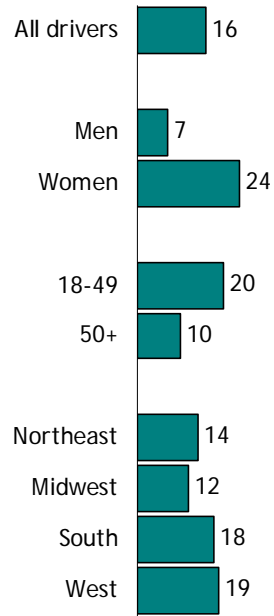


Note: Question asked of drivers

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### Car as Beauty Salon

Percent of drivers who have done any personal grooming while driving in the past year



Note: Question asked of drivers

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