

# A Survey of Traffic Safety Culture Among Iowa Adults

## Prepared for

Office of Traffic Safety  
Iowa Department of Transportation

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Research Brief

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## Overview

The Center for Social and Behavioral Research at the University of Northern Iowa was contracted by the Iowa Department of Transportation to conduct a general population survey of adult Iowans regarding their attitudes and behaviors related to traffic safety culture. The survey covered topics such as driver education, traffic enforcement, road design and engineering, distracted driving and other driving behaviors, and attitudes about traffic safety policies, procedures, and enforcement techniques.

Most Iowans said they believe driving in Iowa is about as safe now as it was 5 years ago; however, one-fourth said driving in Iowa is less safe now than it was 5 years ago.

There are a number of driving-related behaviors that many adult Iowans said are serious threats to traffic safety and are never acceptable to do while driving. Yet, many Iowans report frequently seeing other drivers engaging in these behaviors and they admitted engaging in some of these potentially dangerous behaviors themselves. For example, about one in five adult Iowa drivers said they have sent or read a text message or email while driving in the past 30 days. This has been prohibited in Iowa since July of 2011.



A slight majority said they support using cameras on highways and interstates as well as on city streets to automatically ticket drivers who were speeding. The support for cameras to automatically ticket those who drive through red lights was even stronger with about 7 in 10 adult Iowans in favor of this method of automated enforcement.

The majority of adult Iowans said they support reinstating a law requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets.

Iowa's traffic safety culture is influenced by laws and policies, enforcement methods, the education and training drivers receive, roadway engineering and maintenance, and the behaviors of drivers. A comprehensive approach to traffic safety in Iowa is required to encourage protective factors that enhance traffic safety and reduce the impact of factors that are detrimental to traffic safety. The findings from this study provide policy makers with information to help make decisions about (a) which traffic safety policies, practices, and strategies should be maintained or which should modified, and (b) which efforts to improve traffic safety are most likely to be supported by Iowans.



## Study Methodology

The survey was conducted with 1,088 adult Iowans using a dual-frame sampling design to include both cell and landline phone users. The data were collected over a 10 week period from October 2011 through December 2011.

The survey covered a wide range of traffic safety topics, including driver education, traffic enforcement, road design and engineering, distracted driving and other driving behaviors, and attitudes about traffic safety policies, procedures, and enforcement techniques.

The estimated maximum sampling error at the 95% confidence level for questions involving all respondents is +/- 3%. For questions and/or sub-groups, the sampling error is larger.

## Distracted Driving: Texting

When discussing threats to traffic safety, distracted driving is an important topic to examine. The use of cell phones while driving, especially to send or receive text messages or emails, is one important source of distraction for Iowa drivers.

Sending or reading text messages or emails while driving was rated as *very distracting* by 84% of adult Iowans, and nearly 9 in 10 adult

Iowans said that it is *never acceptable* to send text messages or emails while driving. Yet, nearly two-thirds said they daily or weekly see drivers in their area doing so. Moreover, about 1 in 5 adult Iowa drivers said they had sent or read a text message or email while driving in the past 30 days. Texting while driving is most

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common among adult drivers under 40. For example, 1 in 3 Iowa drivers between the ages of 18 and 39 said they had sent or read a text or email while driving in the past 30 days.

Although texting while driving is illegal in Iowa, 11% of adult Iowans thought it was legal to do so and another 5% said they didn't know whether or not it was legal to do so.

About three-fourths said there is a small chance of being caught sending or receiving text messages while driving.

## Distracted Driving: Talking on Cell Phones

Making or receiving cell phone calls while driving can be distracting for drivers. One-half of adult Iowans reported that making or receiving cell phone calls while driving was *somewhat distracting* and an additional one-third said it was *very distracting*.

Nearly half of adult Iowans said talking on hand-held cell phones while driving is *never acceptable*. With hands-free cell phones, most (52%) adult Iowans said it was *sometimes acceptable* and an additional one-fifth (20%) said it was *always acceptable* to use these hands-free devices while driving.

Cell phone use while driving is a common occurrence. Most Iowans said they see people in their area talking on cell phones while driving *every day* or *a few times per week*.

Two-thirds of adult Iowa drivers said they had talked on cell phones while driving in the past 30 days. There was a strong relationship with the age of the driver and cell phone use: 81% (age 18-39), 69% (age 40-64), and 27% (65 and older). These rates include both hand-held phones and hands-free devices. More than 90% of adult Iowans said they believed talking on cell phones increases the chances of having an accident.



Taken together, these findings suggest that Iowans are aware that cell phone use while driving increases distracted driving and the chances of accidents. Yet, most engage in this potentially risky behavior, and most find it acceptable to do so as long hands-free devices are being used.

## Automated Enforcement: Red Light and Speed Cameras



The majority of adult Iowans said they support using cameras to automatically ticket drivers who run red lights or speed.

- Support using cameras to ticket drivers who drive through **red lights**: **71%**
- Support using cameras to ticket drivers **speeding on major highways**: **55%**
- Support using cameras to ticket drivers **speeding on city streets**: **56%**

83% said driving through red lights is a *very serious threat* to traffic safety

66% said excessive speeding is a *very serious threat* to traffic safety

63% said they see drivers speeding through yellow lights *every day* or *a few times per week*

44% said the chances of getting caught is small for running through a red light

38% said the chances of getting caught is small for speeding

84% said drivers would be more careful if they knew that speed and red light cameras were in place

## Seatbelts, Helmets, and Alcohol

**67%** of adult Iowans said it is *never acceptable* to drive without wearing a seatbelt

**16%** said they had driven without wearing a seatbelt in the past 30 days

**68%** of adult Iowans said they would support reinstating a law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets

**28%** of adult Iowa motorcycle drivers said they usually wear a helmet when riding

**95%** of adult Iowans said it is *never acceptable* to drive after possibly having too much to drink

**15%** of adult Iowans said that, in the past 30 days, they have driven when they thought their blood alcohol content was a little below the legal limit and 5% said they have driven when they thought their BAC might be above the legal limit

## Rating Iowa's Traffic Safety Efforts

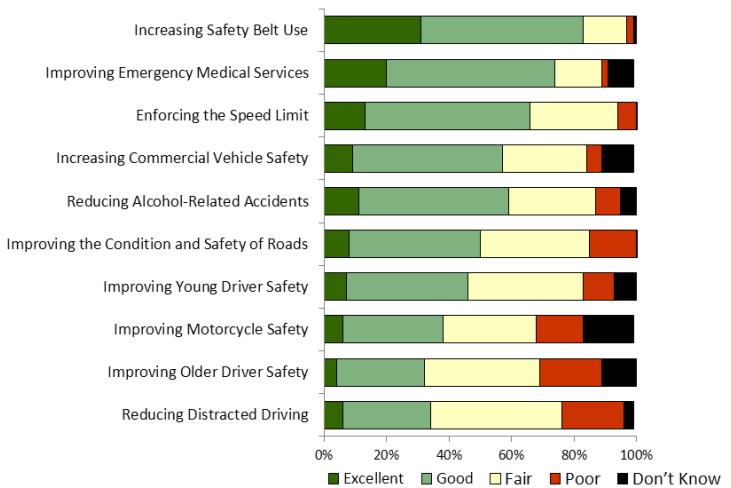
Survey respondents were asked their opinions about how well the State of Iowa has done in 10 areas of traffic safety by rating the efforts as *excellent*, *good*, *fair*, or *poor*.

Iowans gave the state the highest marks on:

- Increasing safety belt use
- Improving EMS
- Enforcing the speed limit

Iowans gave the state the lowest marks on:

- Reducing distracted driving
- Improving older driver safety
- Improving motorcycle safety



## **Summary & Conclusions**

Although most Iowans said they believe driving in Iowa is about as safe now as it was 5 years ago, about one-fourth said driving is becoming less safe. There are a number of driving-related behaviors that many adult Iowans consider to be serious threats to traffic safety that are never acceptable to do while driving. Yet, many Iowans report that they have frequently seen other drivers engaging in these behaviors and they admit engaging, to varying degrees, in some of these potentially dangerous behaviors themselves. Some of these behaviors, such as driving without wearing seatbelts or not wearing helmets while riding motorcycles, pose potential dangers primarily to the drivers. Other behaviors are dangerous because they distract the driver thereby increasing the likelihood of an accident. Still other behaviors are dangerous because they increase the likelihood that an accident would cause severe injuries or fatalities.

Adult Iowans tend to support enforcement efforts (with the exception of increased fines for speeding). In some instances, the opinions of the general public differed from those who would be most directly affected by potential changes to traffic safety policies or practices. For example, there was majority support for reinstating the helmet law for motorcycle riders by the general public; however, the majority of motorcycle drivers were opposed to a helmet law.

The purpose of the present study was to assess the driving-related attitudes and behaviors of adult Iowans. The findings from this survey provide policy makers with information about the general public's perception of how well the State is improving traffic safety in Iowa. The study also provides policy makers with information that can help when making decisions about how to best direct the State's resources and efforts to improve traffic safety. Iowa's traffic safety culture is influenced by (a) the laws that are passed, (b) the methods of enforcement, (c) the education and training drivers receive, (d) the engineering and maintenance of Iowa's road, and (e) the people who travel on Iowa's interstates, highways, city streets, and gravel roads.

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