Distracted While Driving

April 2021

Purpose

In August 2020, the State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company (State Farm®) Enterprise Research Department conducted an online survey with adults age 18 and older to examine their attitudes and behaviors regarding distracted driving. This survey was the ninth wave of a study first conducted in August 2009. This report highlights findings from this research.

Summary

Significantly more drivers admitted to engaging in potentially distracting behavior while driving in 2020 than in past years. For example, more than one-third (36%) reported accessing the internet while driving, up from 17% in 2010. In fact, more drivers in 2020 reported participating in each of the cellphone or navigation-related behaviors while driving than in 2010 or 2015, with the exception of talking on a hand-held phone, where engagement declined significantly since 2010. Drivers who reported interacting with a phone or navigation device while driving were also more likely to report other risky driving behaviors.

Some groups of drivers were more likely to drive distracted. Drivers under age 40 were significantly more likely than those age 40+ to say they engaged in each of the behaviors studied. Further, men were more likely than women to participate in most of the activities.

Individuals reported using their phone or navigation device while driving even though they viewed them as distracting. For instance, 92% of drivers believed reading email while driving was distracting, yet one-third (32%) reported doing it anyway. In addition, nearly three out of five believed manually interacting with a phone while driving greatly increased the likelihood of an auto accident.

Drivers who had been in an accident had a higher tendency to use their phone or navigation device when behind the wheel. Almost half (47%) of drivers surveyed said they had been involved in at least one auto accident as a driver where they had been determined to be at fault or where no fault was established. These individuals were significantly more likely to report participating in each of the distracted behaviors (except programming a navigation system) while driving than those who had not been in an accident.

Many individuals reported driving a vehicle equipped with an advanced safety feature such as Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist. These drivers were significantly more likely to say they engaged in each of the distracted phone/navigation behaviors while driving than those who drove a vehicle without any of the three safety features. Further, many of these drivers also **said they would feel comfortable taking their eyes off the road to focus on other tasks when the safety device was active** — actions which could have serious consequences should the driver need to react quickly to changing driving conditions.

Findings

Significantly more drivers admitted to engaging in potentially distracting behavior while driving in 2020 than in past years.

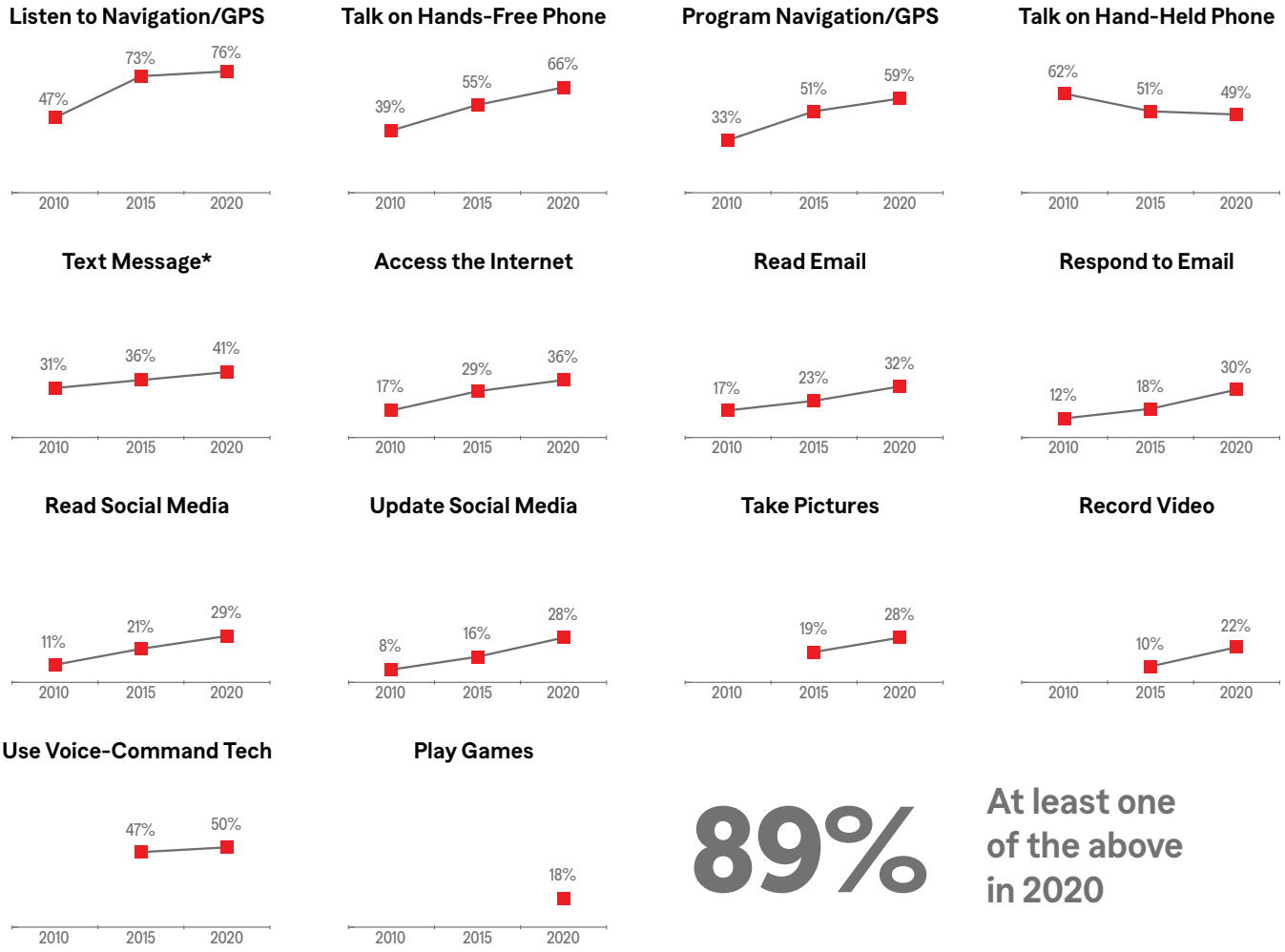
In 2020, nine out of ten drivers (89%) said they engaged in at least one of the 14 behaviors studied while behind the wheel. More drivers reported participating in each behavior in 2020 than in 2010 or 2015, with the exception of talking on a hand-held phone, where engagement declined significantly since 2010.

Smartphone ownership increased steadily since 2011 (the first year such ownership was measured), moving from 53% of all respondents in 2011 to 95% in 2020 (see the Appendix for more detail). This increase in ownership has enabled more drivers to take part in smartphone-related distracted driving, such as accessing the internet (a driving behavior which more than doubled between 2010 and 2020).

Age greatly influenced the reported rate of distracted behaviors in 2020. Drivers under age 40 were significantly more likely than those age 40+ to say they engaged in each of the behaviors studied (see the Appendix).

Men were also significantly more likely to participate in each distracted behavior (except listening to navigation) than women in 2020. In addition, respondents residing in urban areas (with populations of 75,000 or more) were more likely than those in rural or smaller metro areas to talk on a hand-held phone, text message, access the internet, read/respond to email, or read/update social media.

Percent of drivers who participated in various activities while driving



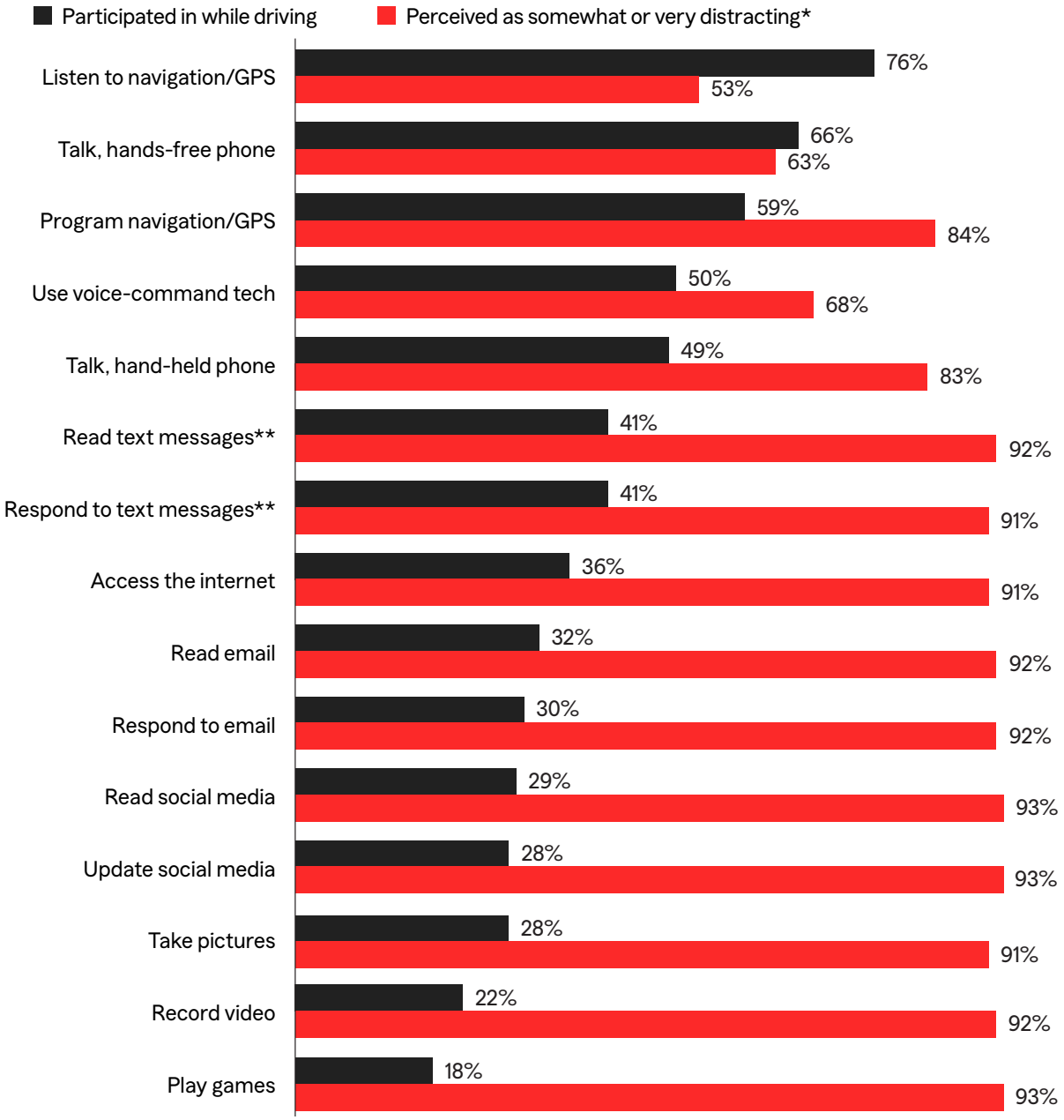
89% At least one of the above in 2020

*Respondents were asked about text messaging in general; a differentiation cannot be made between reading and responding to texts. All activities shown (with the exception of listening to/programming navigation) were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone; some activities were not studied until 2015 or later.
Base: Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week. (n=883)

Individuals reported using their phone or navigation device while driving even though they viewed them as distracting.

A majority of drivers found each of the phone or navigation activities to be “somewhat” or “very distracting,” yet many participated in them anyhow. For example, one-third (32%) said they read email while driving even though 92% found it distracting. Similarly, more than one-quarter (28%) reported taking pictures while driving, yet 91% found the behavior distracting.

Percent of drivers who participated in activities while driving and percent who perceived them as distracting



All activities shown (with the exception of listening to/programming navigation) were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone.

*For the question asking how distracting these activities are, other response options included “Not at all distracting” and “Don’t know.” Those who responded “Don’t know” were excluded from the analysis for that particular activity. (Base sizes ranged from 792 to 838)

**For the survey item asking respondents if they participated in the activity, the item did not distinguish between reading or responding to text messages. Thus, the percentage that participated in “text messaging” is shown for both activities.

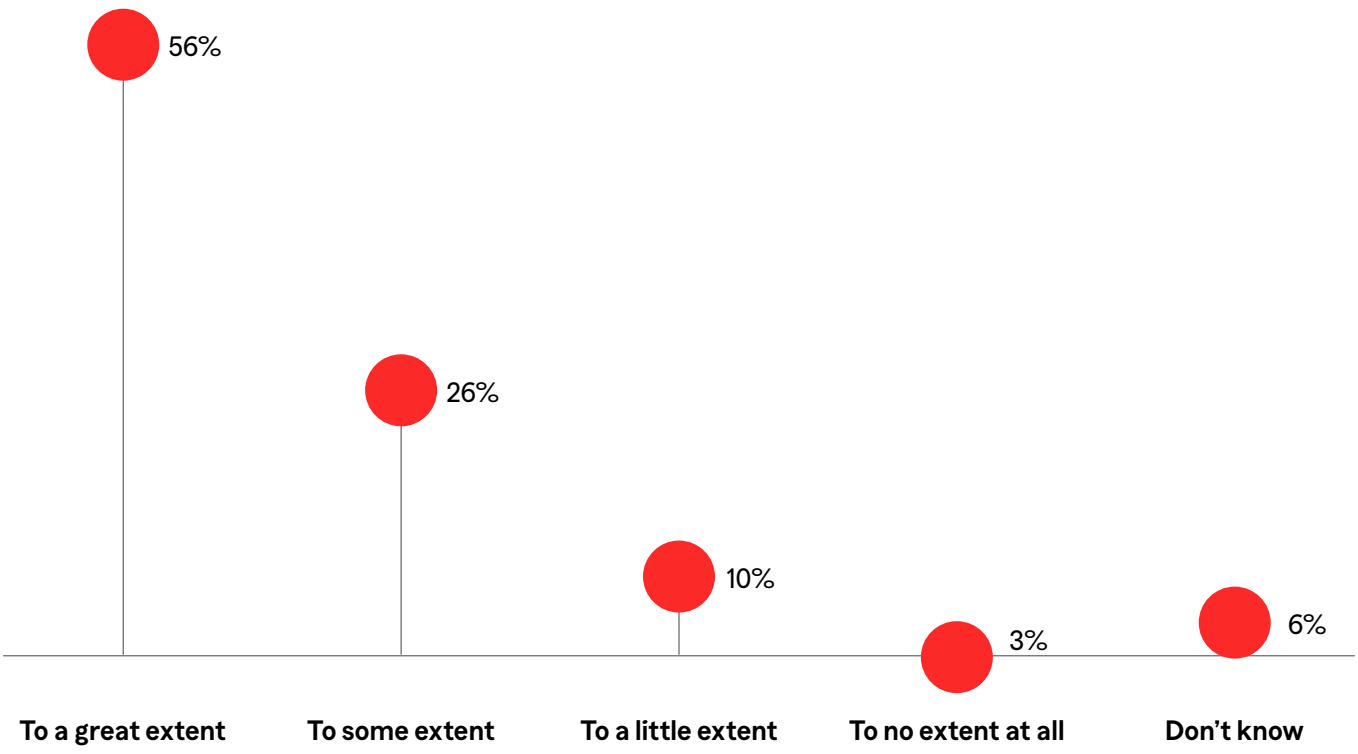
Base for Participate While Driving: Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver’s license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week. (n=883)

Not only did drivers perceive cellphone activities to be a distraction when driving, most also believed such behavior increased the likelihood of an accident.

Nearly three out of five drivers believed manually interacting with a phone while driving greatly increased the likelihood of an accident, while another one-quarter thought the chances of an accident increased "to some extent."

Older individuals (i.e., age 50+) were significantly more likely than younger ones to say manually manipulating a phone while driving increases the likelihood of an accident "to a great extent."

"To what extent do you think manual interactions with a cellphone while driving increases the likelihood that you will be involved in an accident?"

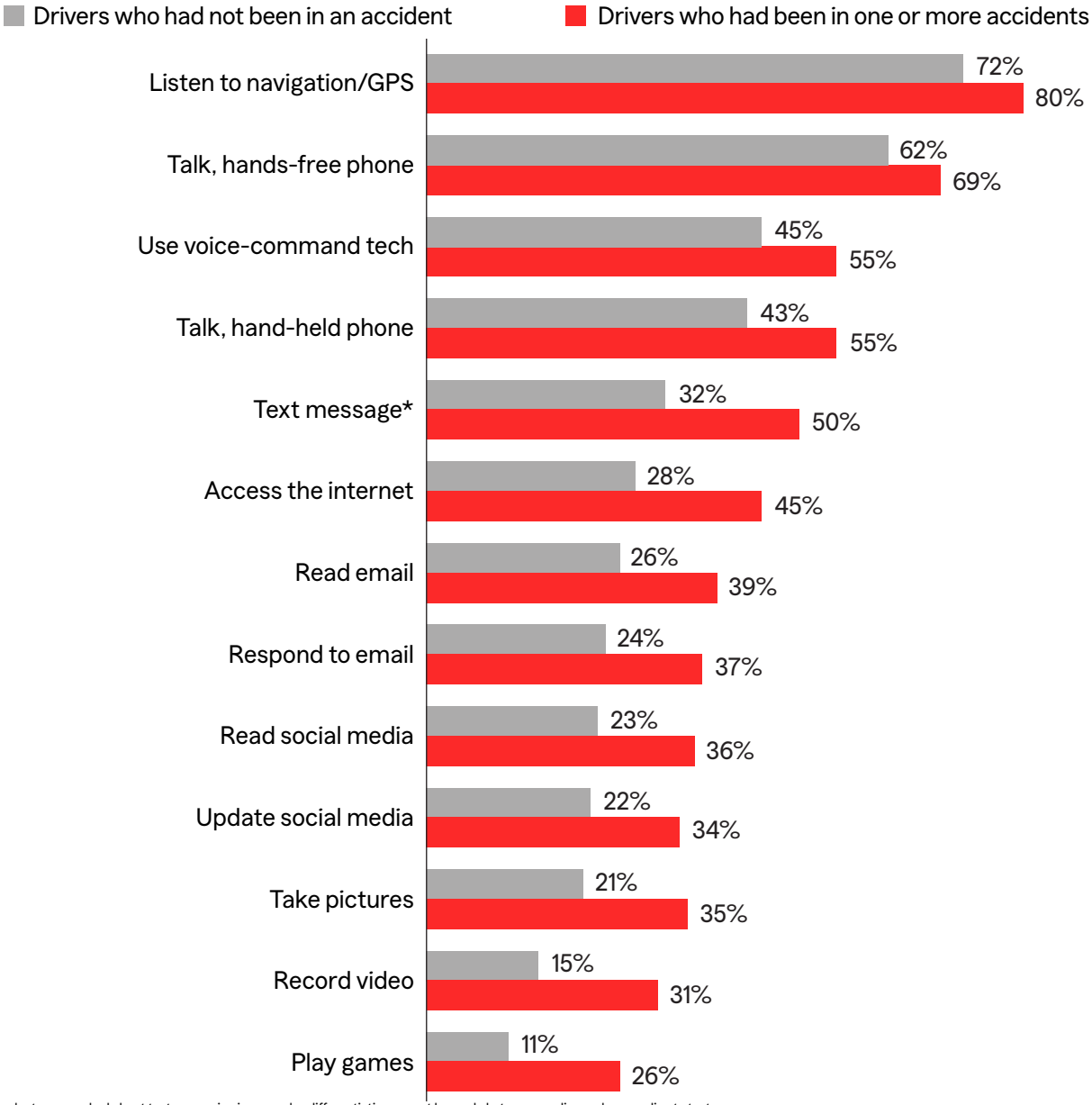


Examples of "manual interactions" were provided to survey respondents and included "texting, sending emails, playing video games, updating social media, etc.". Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding. Base: Respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone and drove more than one hour per week. (n=883)

Using a phone or navigation device while driving can increase the risk of an auto accident, yet drivers who had been in an accident had a higher tendency to use their devices when behind the wheel.

Almost half (47%) of drivers surveyed said they had been involved in at least one auto accident as a driver where they had been determined to be at fault or where no fault was established. Despite their accident history, individuals who had been in a prior crash were significantly more likely to report participating in each of the distracted behaviors (except programming a navigation system) while driving than drivers who had not been in an accident.

Activities drivers said they participated in while driving by whether or not the driver had been involved in an auto accident



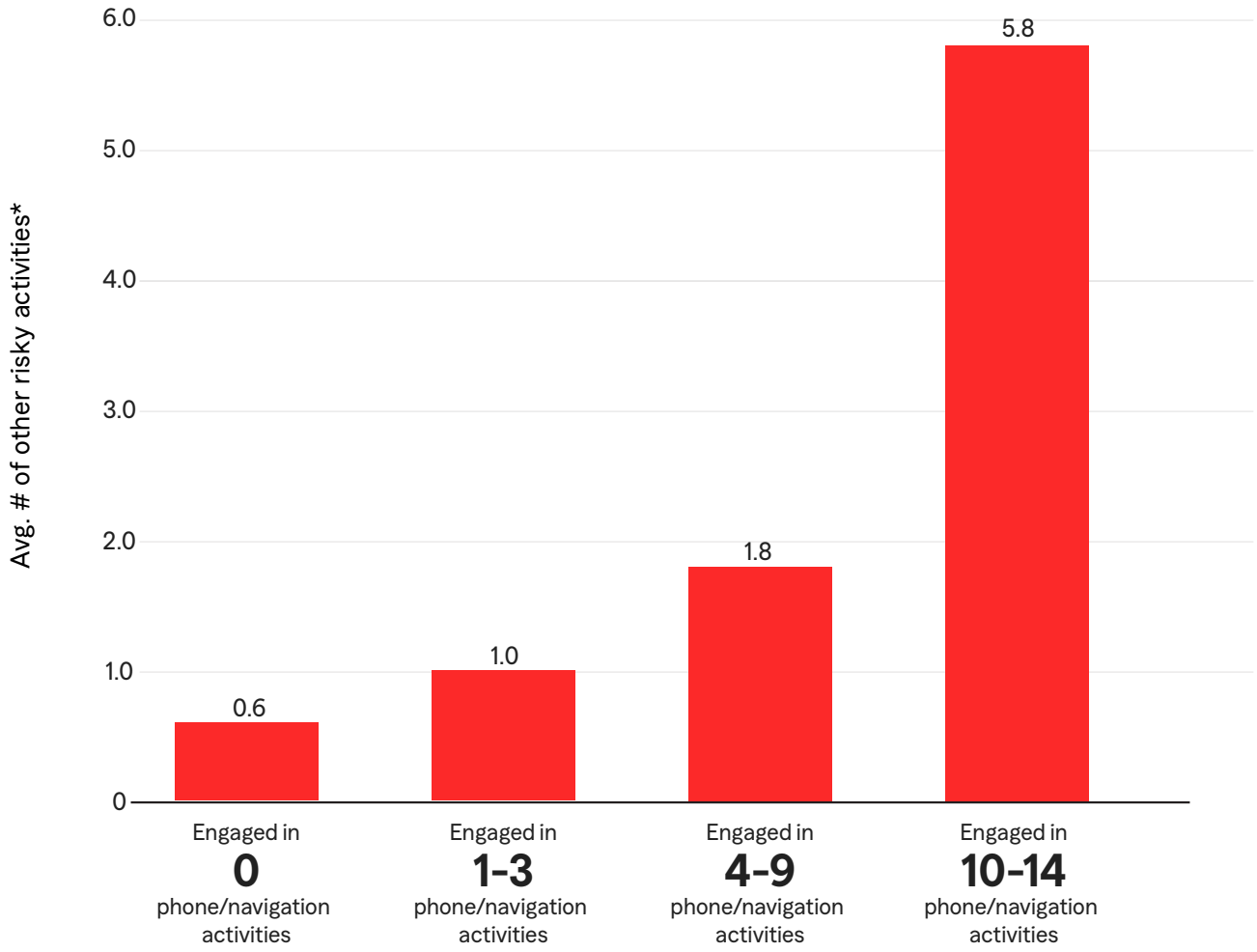
*Respondents were asked about text messaging in general; a differentiation cannot be made between reading and responding to texts.
All activities shown (with the exception of listening to navigation) were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone.
Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week. Respondents who said they "Don't know/Can't remember" the number of auto accidents they had been involved in where they were determined to be at fault or where no fault was established were excluded from the analysis.
Base sizes: Drivers Who Had Not Been in an Accident (n=446); Drivers Who Had Been in 1+ Accidents (n=402)

Drivers who engaged in phone and navigation usage were also more likely to say they engaged in other dangerous driving behaviors.

In addition to the distracted phone and navigation behaviors, drivers were also asked about their participation in ten other potentially dangerous driving activities: speeding, driving drowsy, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, failing to use turn signals, failing to wear a seat belt, racing, weaving, cutting another driver off, running a red light or stop sign, and self-grooming. Many drivers reported engaging in these other dangerous driving behaviors. In fact, the more phone/navigation activities individuals said they engaged in while driving, the more of these additional risky behaviors they mentioned as well.

Furthermore, younger drivers (under age 40) and those who had been in a prior auto accident were much more likely to exhibit these other dangerous driving behaviors than other individuals (see the Appendix for more detail).

Average number of other risky activities drivers said they participated in by number of phone/navigation activities they participated in while driving



*Other risky activities included speeding, driving drowsy, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, failing to use turn signals, failing to wear a seat belt, racing, weaving, cutting another driver off, running a red light or stop sign, and self-grooming.

Respondents were considered to participate in an activity if they selected "5% or more of the time" (phone/navigation activities) or "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" (other risky activities) when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving.

Base sizes: 0 phone/navigation activities (n=282); 1-3 activities (n=265); 4-9 activities (n=173); 10-14 activities (n=163).

Many drivers could benefit from additional education about their state laws involving phone use while driving.

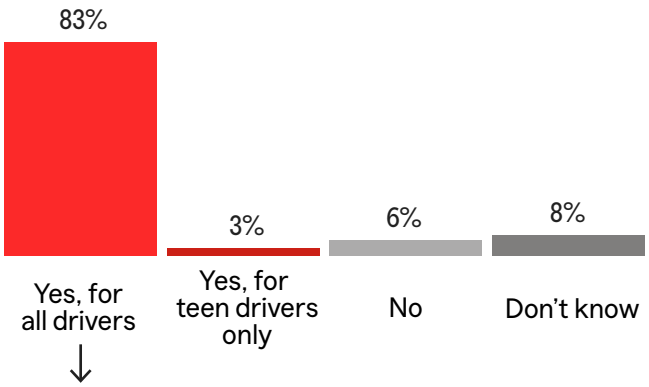
Roughly two dozen states have laws banning the use of hand-held cellphones while driving for *all* drivers (regardless of age). While the majority of respondents residing in these states were aware of such laws, roughly one in five were not — with 6% saying hand-held phone use was not banned at all.

Similarly, all states (except for Missouri and Montana) prohibit *all* drivers from texting while driving. Yet only 79% of individuals were aware of such laws.

Among drivers who were aware of their state laws banning hand-held phone use or texting while driving, only about one-third felt such laws were effective, while roughly half believed such laws were ineffective in discouraging the distracted behavior.

"To your knowledge, does your state/local law prohibit ___ while driving?"

Hand-held cellphones*

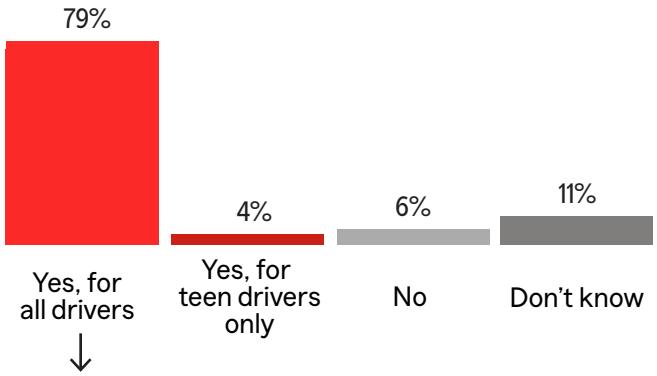


"How effective is your state/local law in preventing drivers from using a hand-held cellphone while driving?"

	% Responding
Very/Somewhat Effective	37%
Neither Effective nor Ineffective	17%
Very/Somewhat Ineffective	46%

Base: Respondents who live in a state where hand-held cell phone use while driving is banned for all drivers AND who correctly said such behavior is prohibited for all drivers. (n=420)

Texting**



"How effective is your state/local law in preventing drivers from texting while driving?"

	% Responding
Very/Somewhat Effective	31%
Neither Effective nor Ineffective	17%
Very/Somewhat Ineffective	52%

Base: Respondents who live in a state where texting while driving is prohibited for all drivers AND who correctly said such behavior is prohibited for all drivers. (n=770)

*Only includes respondents from states in which hand-held cellphone use while driving is banned for all drivers (AZ, CA, CT, DC, DE, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, ME, MD, MA, MN, NV, NH, NJ, NY, OR, RI, SD, TN, VT, WA, WV). (n=504)

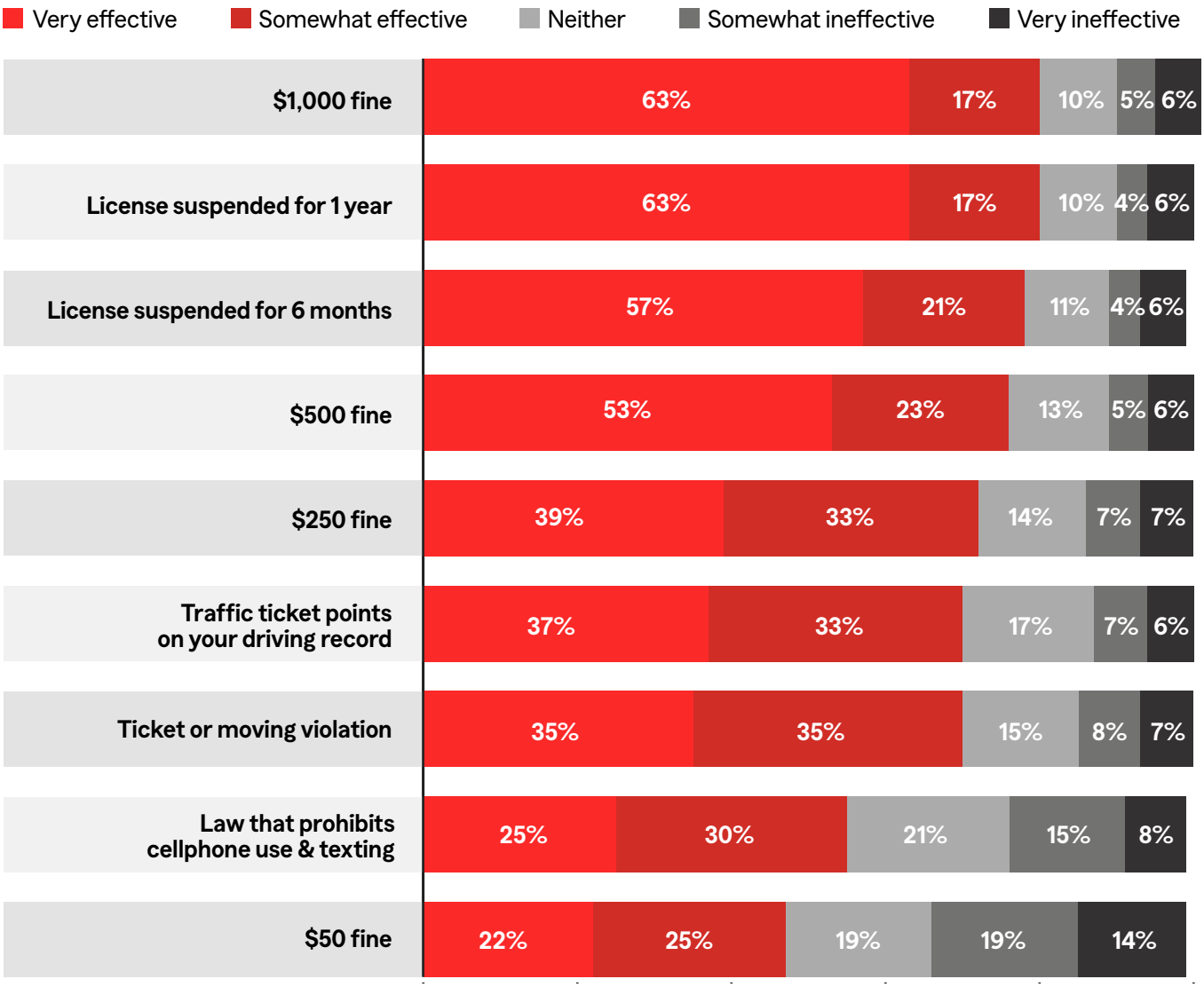
**Only includes respondents from states in which texting while driving is banned for all drivers (All states except MO and MT). (n=978)

Laws which prohibit phone use while driving may be less impactful as a stand-alone measure than large monetary fines or having a driver's license suspended.

At least three-quarters of drivers believed fines of $500 or more, or license suspensions of six months or longer, would be effective in deterring them from using their phone while driving. In contrast, fewer individuals (55%) felt laws, by themselves, were effective deterrents.

Women were significantly more likely than men to feel each measure would be an effective deterrent except a law, ticket/moving violation, or traffic ticket points.

"How effective is each of the following in discouraging you from using a cellphone while driving?"



Base: All general market respondents. (n=1,004)

Note: Responses may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Many drivers reported driving a vehicle equipped with advanced safety features, and some of these individuals may be too reliant on the systems.

Roughly three in ten drivers said their vehicle was equipped with Automatic Emergency Braking or Adaptive Cruise Control, while one-quarter reportedly drove a vehicle with Lane Keeping Assist. Drivers of newer vehicles (i.e., said their vehicle was less than five years old) were significantly more likely to say they had each of the safety features than individuals with older vehicles. About 45% of respondents reported driving a vehicle that was less than five years old (see Appendix).

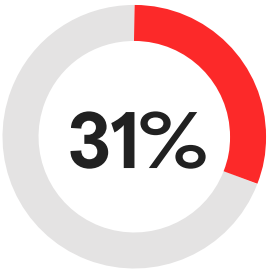
The advanced safety features may give drivers a false sense of security as many drivers of these vehicles said they would feel comfortable taking their eyes off the road to focus on other tasks when the safety devices were active. Such actions could lead to serious consequences should the driver need to react quickly to changing driving conditions.

Percent of drivers who said the vehicle they drive most often is equipped with ...

Automatic Emergency Braking

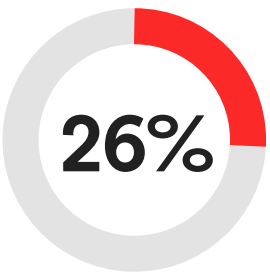
... and **30%** of these individuals who at least occasionally activate the feature are **comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road** to focus on another task when Automatic Emergency Braking is active.

Adaptive Cruise Control



... and **28%** of these individuals* are **comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road** to focus on another task when Adaptive Cruise Control is active.

Lane Keeping Assist



... and **27%** of these individuals who at least occasionally activate the feature are **comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road** to focus on another task when Lane Keeping Assist is active.

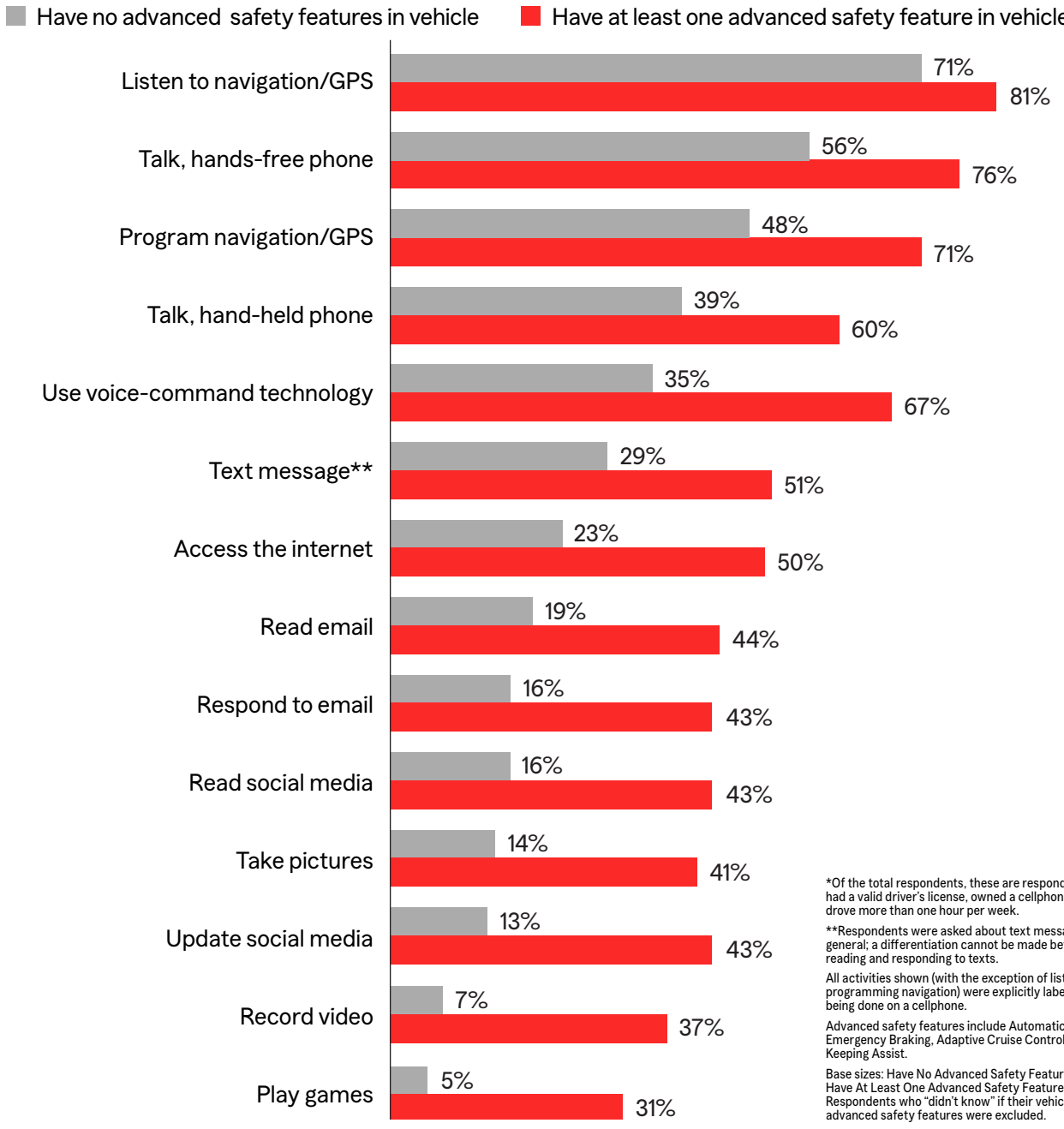
Base for safety feature ownership: All respondents (n=1,004). See the Appendix for a definition of each safety feature.

*Drivers with Adaptive Cruise Control were not asked how frequently the feature was active (or turned on) due to certain conditions being necessary (e.g., vehicle speed) in order for the feature to operate properly. Analyses for the other two features were restricted to those who said their vehicle was equipped with the safety feature and it was "Always," "Frequently," "Sometimes," or "Rarely" turned on (Automatic Emergency Braking n=272 out of 296 with the feature; Lane Keeping Assist n=247 out of 261 with the feature).

Individuals who drive vehicles with advanced safety features may need reminding of the importance of staying alert as these drivers had a higher tendency of using their phones when behind the wheel.

Among all respondents, 45% reported driving a vehicle with at least one of the advanced safety features (Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist).* These individuals were significantly more likely to say they engaged in each of the distracted cellphone or navigation behaviors while driving than those whose vehicle was not equipped with any of the advanced features.

Activities drivers said they participated in while driving by whether or not individuals drove a vehicle with advanced safety features



*Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week.

**Respondents were asked about text messaging in general; a differentiation cannot be made between reading and responding to texts.

All activities shown (with the exception of listening/programming navigation) were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone.

Advanced safety features include Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist.

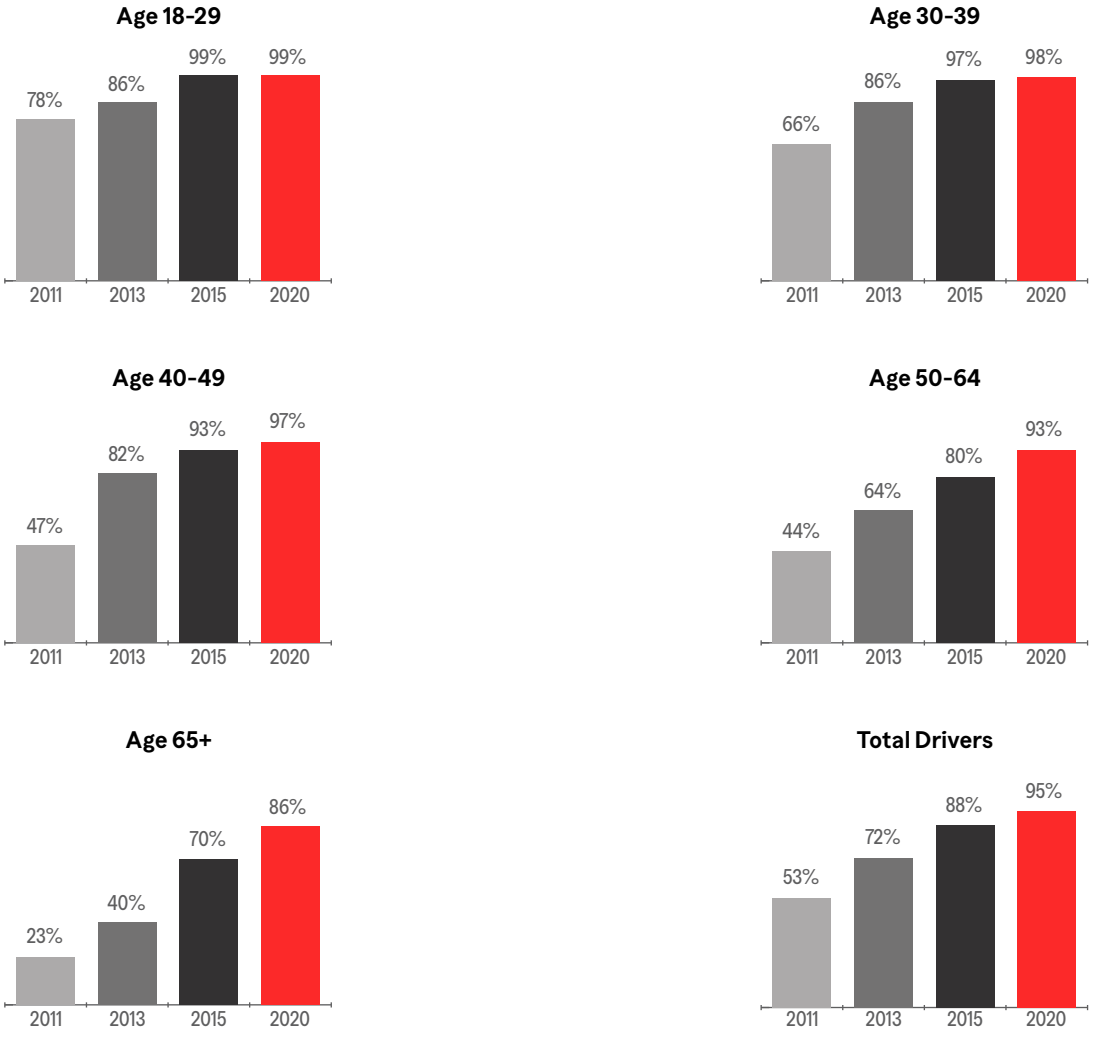
Base sizes: Have No Advanced Safety Features (n=397); Have At Least One Advanced Safety Feature (n=394); Respondents who "didn't know" if their vehicle had any advanced safety features were excluded.

Appendix

Smartphone ownership has increased significantly among all age groups since 2011.

In 2020, nearly all drivers (95%) reported owning a smartphone, compared to just over half of drivers in 2011 when measurement began. In addition, almost all drivers under 50 years of age reported having a smartphone in 2020. Even among the oldest drivers (those 65 and older), 86% said they had a smartphone in 2020, an increase of over 60 percentage points since 2011.

Percentage of drivers who own a smartphone



Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone and drove at least one hour per week.

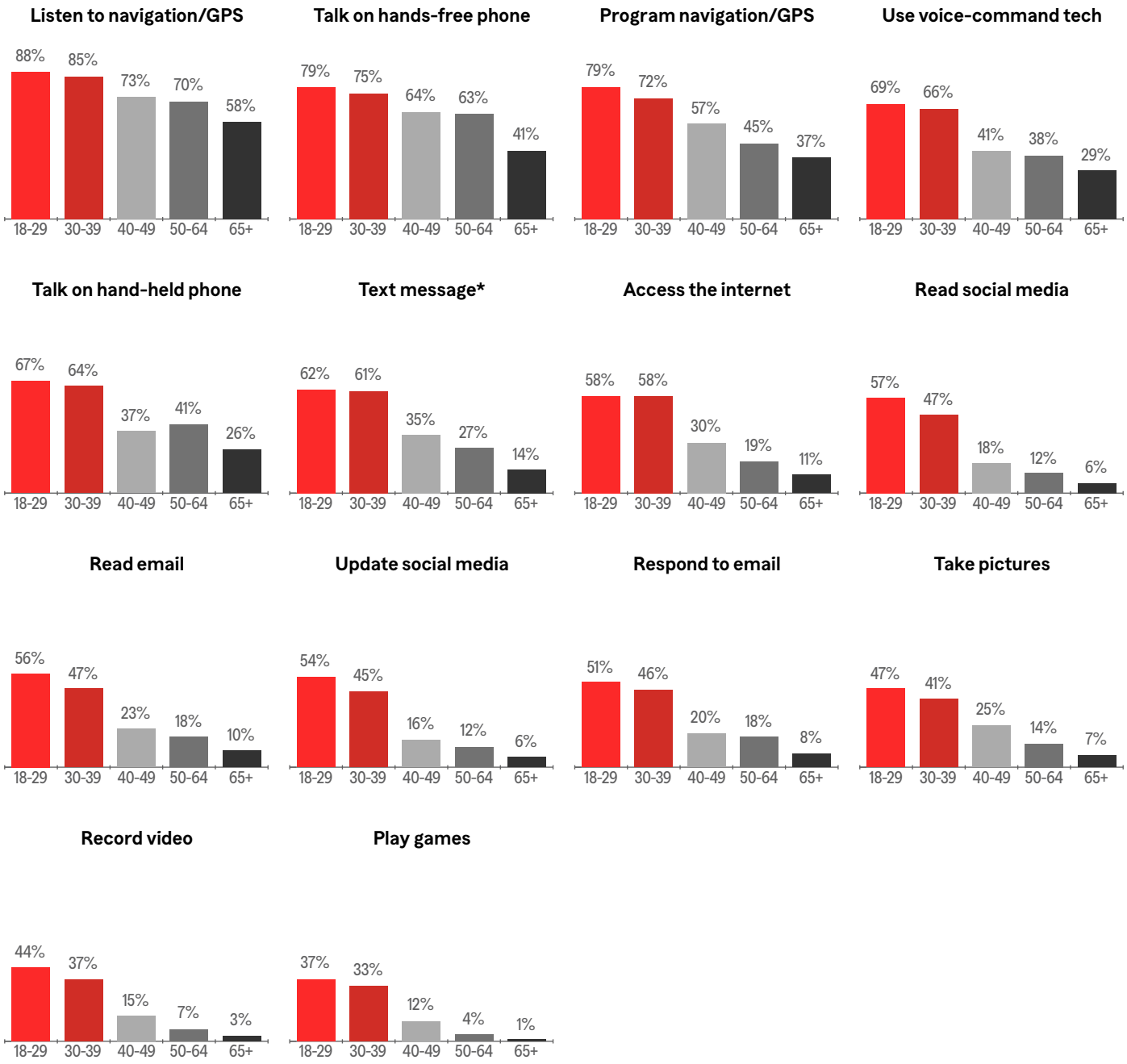
NOTE: Smartphone ownership results are not available prior to 2011.

Base sizes: 2011 (n=924); 2013 (n=931); 2015 (n=905); 2020 (n=1,004).

Drivers under age 40 were significantly more likely to engage in each of the phone/navigation activities while driving than those age 40+.

The oldest drivers (i.e., age 65 and older) were the least likely to report engaging in each activity when behind the wheel.

Activities drivers said they participated in while driving by age of the driver



*Respondents were asked about text messaging in general; a differentiation cannot be made between reading and responding to texts.

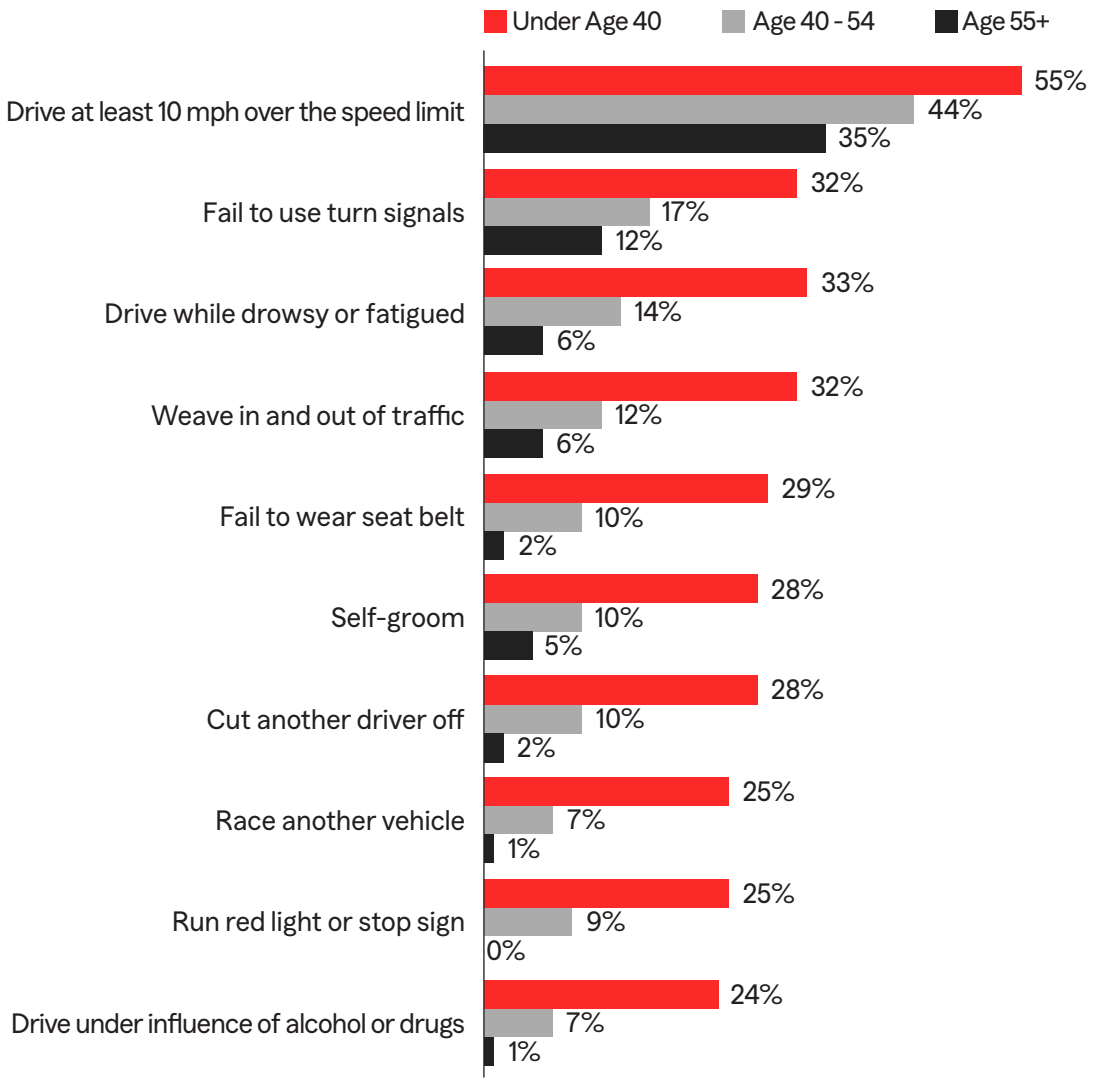
All activities shown (with the exception of listening to/programming navigation) were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone.

Of the total 2020 respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week.
Base sizes: Age 18-29 (n=203); Age 30-39 (n=175); Age 40-49 (n=139); Age 50-64 (n=227); Age 65+ (n=139).

Younger drivers were also significantly more likely to exhibit other risky behaviors while driving.

In addition to the distracted phone and navigation behaviors, drivers were also asked about their participation in several other potentially dangerous driving behaviors including speeding, driving drowsy, failing to use turn signals, or driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Drivers under age 40 were significantly more likely to exhibit these other dangerous driving behaviors than those age 40 or older.

Other risky activities drivers said they participated in while driving by age of the driver



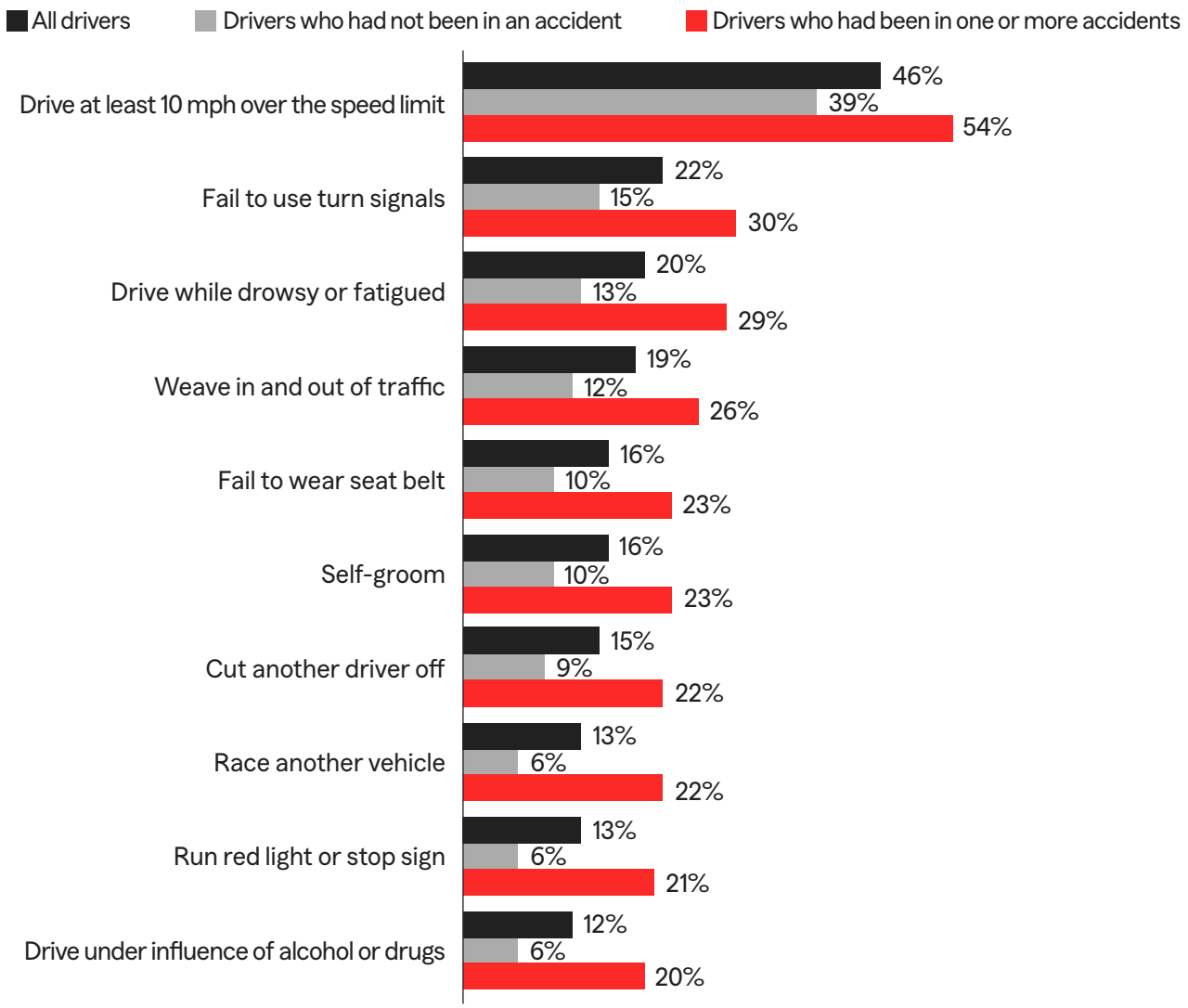
Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity.

Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week.

Base sizes: Under Age 40 (n=378); Age 40-54 (n=240); Age 55+ (n=265)

In addition, drivers who had been in a prior auto accident were much more likely to exhibit other dangerous driving behaviors than those who had not been involved in an accident.

Other risky activities drivers said they participated in while driving by auto accident involvement



Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity.

Respondents who said they "Don't know/Can't remember" the number of auto accidents they had been involved in where they were determined to be at fault or where no fault was established were excluded from the analysis.

Of the total respondents, these are respondents who had a valid driver's license, owned a cellphone, and drove more than one hour per week.

Base sizes: All 2020 Drivers (n=883); Drivers Who Had Not Been in an Accident (n=446); Drivers Who Had Been in 1+ Accidents (n=402)

Methodology

In August 2020, the State Farm Enterprise Research Department used an outside panel vendor to conduct an online survey of U.S. consumers age 18 and older. Survey responses were received from approximately 1,000 consumers who reported having a valid driver's license, owning a cellphone, and driving at least one hour per week.

Three advanced safety features were explored in this research. Definitions of those features as presented to respondents are shown below:

Automatic Emergency Braking is an advanced vehicle technology that can automatically apply the brakes to avoid or lessen the severity of a crash.

Adaptive Cruise Control is an advanced vehicle technology that, in certain situations, can enable your vehicle to automatically adjust its speed to maintain a specific distance behind another vehicle.

Lane Keeping Assist is an advanced vehicle technology that, in certain situations, can enable your vehicle to automatically steer within your lane.