From research to real-world impact:

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF DISTRACTED DRIVING

What drivers recognize, what they underestimate, and why awareness does not always change behavior.

MIT AGELAB

StateFarm®

The Challenge

EVERYDAY DRIVING INCLUDES MANY COMPETING DEMANDS, BUT DRIVERS DO NOT VIEW THEM EQUALLY

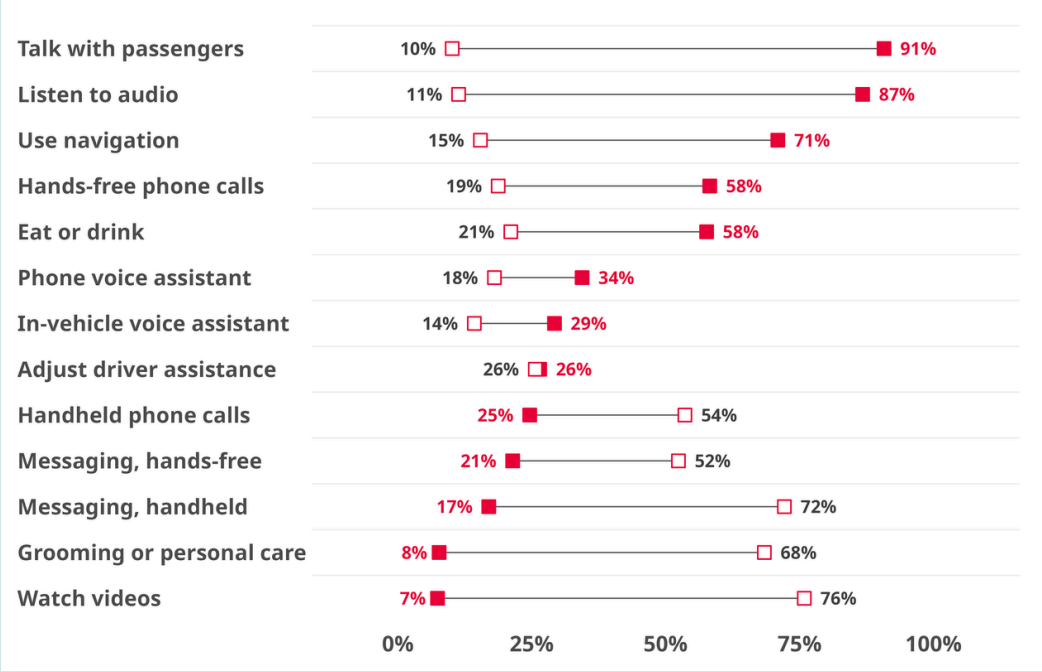
Drivers recognize distracted driving in general as a serious safety issue, but they do not always recognize all sources of distraction or avoid behaviors they know are distracting. Distraction is broader than phones and screens. Sources of distraction can also come from within the driver.

Some of these demands are obvious and widely recognized as distracting. Other factors that can become sources of distraction are familiar, routine, or integrated into the driving experience and may not be perceived as requiring much attention. As a result, what drivers recognize as distracting does not always align with what they do behind the wheel.

PERCEPTIONS OF DISTRACTION DO NOT ALWAYS MATCH BEHAVIOR

Drivers are generally less likely to engage in activities they perceive as more attention-demanding, but risky behaviors persist.

Even for less commonly reported activities, such as handheld phone calls, one in four drivers report engaging in them at least sometimes. Perceiving that an activity demands attention does not necessarily mean drivers avoid it.



Drivers report doing at least sometimes

Drivers report the activity to be distracting

The Research

Led by Dr. Pnina Gershon, a research scientist at the MIT AgeLab Center for Transportation & Logistics and founder of the MIT AWARE initiative*, the team, in collaboration with State Farm®**, launched a multi-year research program focused on driver distraction and supporting safer driving behavior.

Survey data collected in this research program so far offer insight into how drivers' perceptions of distraction relate to their actual behavior, including who may be more or less likely to engage in distraction activities – even when they recognize them as distracting. Younger drivers (aged 18-24) are over represented among those who engage in these behaviors despite recognizing the distraction involved. In contrast, older drivers (65 and older) are more likely to be represented among those who avoid distracting activities.

A national survey of US drivers revealed important gaps between risk perception, perceived distraction, and self-reported driving behavior.

Perceive some activities as low risk and avoid doing them while driving

Perceive some activities as high risk and avoid doing them while driving

Perceive some activities as low risk and do them while driving

Perceive some activities as high risk but do them anyway while driving

TWO DIFFERENT PERCEPTION-BEHAVIOR GAPS EMERGED.

"I KNOW IT IS DISTRACTING, BUT I STILL DO IT"

Some drivers recognize that an activity takes substantial attention away from driving but continue to engage in it. For these drivers, awareness is not the primary problem. The challenge is helping translate what they already know into safer decisions in the moment.

"I DO IT BECAUSE I DON'T SEE IT AS VERY DISTRACTING"

These drivers engage in activities they perceive as relatively low in distraction, even though those activities can place meaningful demands on driver attention. For these drivers, the challenge may be a perception gap, suggesting a greater role for education and risk communication.

DIFFERENT PROBLEMS MAY REQUIRE DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS.

The Impact

AWARENESS IS NECESSARY. BUT AWARENESS ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH.

The state of distraction is not defined by a single behavior. It reflects a gap between what drivers recognize, what they believe they can manage, and what they actually do.

- Drivers who underestimate distraction may need clearer risk communication and education.
- Drivers who already recognize the risk but engage anyway may benefit from interventions or support that helps them make safer choices in the moment.

THE OPPORTUNITY IS TO MOVE BEYOND TELLING DRIVERS THAT DISTRACTION IS DANGEROUS AND TOWARD DESIGNING INTERVENTIONS AROUND HOW DRIVERS ACTUALLY PERCEIVE, EXPERIENCE, AND RESPOND TO RISK.

About the study: Data for this research were collected by NORC at the University of Chicago from their AmeriSpeak Panel, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the US household population. To be eligible for the study, respondents had to report that they had a current, valid driver's license and drive one or more days per week on average. Surveys were conducted online and in English between July 16-27, 2026. The final sample was comprised of 1,203 Americans, aged 18 and up. During analysis, survey responses were weighted to represent the US population.

About AWARE* at the MIT AgeLab: AWARE is a research initiative focused on developing intelligent vehicle systems that can better understand drivers and support them in real-world conditions. Based at the MIT AgeLab and Center for Transportation & Logistics, AWARE brings together naturalistic driving research, advanced simulation, behavioral science, and artificial intelligence to study how driver state, behavior, and context interact across the driving journey. Its research examines areas such as distraction, fatigue, impairment, workload, automation use, driver monitoring, and human-machine interaction, with the goal of moving beyond simply detecting driver behavior toward systems that can sense, interpret, respond, and promote safer and more appropriate driver engagement. Through this work, AWARE is building the evidence and methods needed to support the next generation of adaptive, human-centered mobility technologies.

About State Farm:** For over 100 years, the mission of State Farm has been to help people manage the risks of everyday life, recover from the unexpected and realize their dreams. State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company and its affiliates are the largest providers of auto and home insurance combined in the United States. Its more than 19,200 agent offices and over 62,000 employees serve over 96 million policies and accounts – including auto, fire, life, health, commercial policies and financial services accounts. Commercial auto insurance, along with coverage for renters, business owners, boats and motorcycles, is also available. State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company is the parent of the State Farm family of companies. State Farm is ranked No. 32 on the 2025 Fortune 500 list of largest companies. For more information, please visit http://www.statefarm.com.

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