

Attitudes Toward Speeding: Insights from Focus Groups and a National Survey of U.S. Drivers

INTRODUCTION

Speeding remains a serious threat to safe mobility. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates almost 30% of motor vehicle related fatalities were related to speeding in 2023. Findings from the AAA Foundation's Traffic Safety Culture Index project reveal a notable disconnect with fatality risks: speeding is perceived as less dangerous than other risky driving behaviors. Speeding is the most commonly reported risky driving behavior and, for a substantial proportion of drivers, the only risky behavior in which they engage. Good evidence shows that speeding-related countermeasures, such as automated enforcement cameras and intelligent speed assistance can reduce speeding-related crashes, but these countermeasures receive comparatively low levels of support from the American public. To better understand these inconsistencies, this project investigated how the American public conceptualizes and defines speeding behavior and examined attitudes toward speeding-related countermeasures. This is the first of two reports presenting the results of this project.

METHOD

This report employed a three-part approach to examine attitudes towards speeding. Part 1 reviewed the current state of knowledge on these topics. Part 2 involved eight focus group discussions with 58 drivers to qualitatively explore how people understand and define speeding and dissect attitudes towards speeding-related countermeasures. Part 3 designed a bespoke questionnaire to measure different attitudinal dimensions, which was administered to a nationally representative sample of over 16,000 drivers. Quantitative analysis examined the prevalence of attitudes towards speeding and speeding-related countermeasures. A latent class approach explored how attitudinal dimensions interact to shape overall perceptions of speeding. State-level estimates of attitudes towards speeding are also presented. An upcoming report will present results from Part 4 of this project, which leveraged learnings from Parts 1–3 of this study to generate hypotheses on speeding and explore these using a driving simulator.

TECHNICAL REPORT:

Steinbach, R., McDonough, J., Hungund, A., Kasha, A., & Bai, X. (2026). *Attitudes Towards Speeding: Insights from Focus Groups and a National Survey of U.S. Drivers* (Technical Report). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.



DOWNLOAD REPORT

ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

Founded in 1947, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and educational organization dedicated to saving lives by preventing traffic crashes and reducing injuries when crashes occur. Funding for this research was provided by voluntary contributions from AAA/CAA and their affiliated motor clubs, individual members, AAA-affiliated insurance companies, and other organizations or sources.

**607 14TH STREET, NW, STE 701
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202-638-5944
AAAFOUNDATION.ORG**

KEY FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND A NATIONAL SURVEY

- Drivers generally viewed **speed limits as appropriate**, but often **did not view strict compliance as necessary**. Most drivers in the national survey would choose speed limits that were only slightly higher than current expectations. However, a sizeable minority favored substantially higher limits, with approximately **one-in-five drivers favoring speed limits at least 10% above expected levels**.
- Qualitative results indicated that in the absence of information about posted speed limits, drivers primarily rely on two main criteria when judging whether another driver is speeding: whether they were **keeping pace** with surrounding traffic and the driver's apparent **ability to operate the vehicle safely** under the prevailing conditions.
- A common social threshold for speeding emerged around **10 miles per hour (mph) over the posted limit**, which many participants viewed as acceptable and unlikely to result in enforcement. Depending on the roadway context, speeds up to 25 mph above the posted limit were acceptable to drivers in certain circumstances.
- The **flow of traffic** functioned as a **powerful social norm**: Driving slower than surrounding traffic was often viewed as problematic; 49% of drivers agreed with the statement: *It's safer for me to drive with the flow of traffic than obey the speed limit*.
- **Perceptions of enforcement strongly influenced speed choices**. Many drivers based their speeds on perceived police tolerance, viewing speeding as beginning only above an expected enforcement threshold. Speeds above the posted limit were often seen as acceptable if unenforced, with drivers typically expecting enforcement to begin 10–12 mph over the limit, depending on roadway type.
- In drivers' accounts, speeding was closely linked to feelings of **autonomy and personal freedom**. Many drivers described speed choice as a matter of personal discretion, based on careful assessments of the circumstances and their own driving ability. Restrictions on speed were sometimes interpreted as restrictions on personal freedom.
- Drivers recounted motivations for speeding beyond maintaining traffic flow and saving travel time. Drivers **expressed satisfaction** from: controlling their vehicles, demonstrating driving skills, and **feeling competent and capable behind the wheel**. Modern vehicles and roadways were sometimes described as making driving a monotonous task, leading some drivers to use **speed as a way to increase their own engagement** and reduce boredom behind the wheel.
- Drivers discussed **competing pressures** when choosing appropriate travel speeds. On one hand, drivers recognized a duty to comply with traffic laws and be a responsible citizen. On the other, they described social norms, personal preferences, and psychological rewards that encouraged driving above the posted speed limit. Rather than rejecting traffic laws outright, many drivers navigated speed choice as a **continual negotiation between what they considered moral, socially acceptable, and personally satisfying**.
- Drivers used forms of **moral disengagement to justify speeding** including: minimizing the potential consequences, arguing that speeding is actually *safer* than adhering to the speed limit, shifting responsibility to traffic conditions or other drivers, and distinguishing between *safe* and *dangerous* speeding.
- Less than half of drivers supported using infrastructure-based countermeasures, but they were broadly seen as effective in reducing speeds. Automated enforcement was more popular, with nearly three-in-four drivers supporting their use in areas with a high potential for speed-related crashes. **Increased police presence received the highest support**; 88% of drivers supported using this strategy in areas with a high potential for speed-related crashes

- Overall public acceptance of having an **intelligent speed assistance (ISA) technology** feature in a driver's own vehicle (as an alert, an overridable speed limiter, and a non-overridable speed limiter) ranged from nearly a quarter to more than half, depending on the configuration, with **support waning in relation to level of the feature's invasiveness**. Acceptance of this technology in the vehicles of other drivers was higher for certain groups (e.g., younger drivers, older drivers, professional drivers, and proven offenders).
- In focus group discussions, supporters of ISA technology valued what they considered a **tool to help them adhere to speed limits**. Resistance reflected not only concerns about the technologies themselves—including **misunderstandings, misconceptions, and mistrust**—but also what they symbolized: **a perceived erosion of driver freedom, discretion, and control**.
- Drivers' perceptions of speeding reflect the interplay of multiple attitudinal dimensions. Using survey-derived measures of speeding-related attitudes and support for countermeasures, latent class analysis identified five driver mindsets as shown in the table below.

Driver Mindset	Summary	Description
Strict Compliance Advocates (21%)	<i>Driving safely is part of being a good person.</i>	These drivers view speed limits as legitimate safety standards, and compliance is driven by their beliefs about responsible and safe driving.
Safety Focused Realists (14%)	<i>The risks of speeding aren't worth the rewards.</i>	These drivers recognize that some speeding may be possible under certain conditions but choose not to speed because they perceive the safety and societal consequences as outweighing any benefits.
Principled Pragmatists (26%)	<i>Rules matter, but context matters too.</i>	These drivers generally follow speed limits but believe that experienced drivers should retain discretion to adjust their speed when traffic conditions warrant it.
Tolerant but Non-Compliant Drivers (23%)	<i>Everyone speeds, and it's usually not a big deal.</i>	These drivers view speeding as a routine and largely acceptable part of driving, with convenience, habit, and situational factors often outweighing concerns about risk or enforcement.
Autonomy-First Drivers (16%)	<i>The driver—not the system—should decide how fast to drive.</i>	These drivers view speed choice as a matter of personal judgment and strongly resist efforts by authorities or technology to constrain their driving behavior.

- The distinct driver mindsets identified in this study suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to speed management is unlikely to be optimal, highlighting the need for interventions tailored to the attitudes, motivations, and behavioral tendencies of different driver populations.