

# Drivers admit to risky behaviors

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Five percent of drivers admitted to nodding off or falling asleep behind the wheel, according to a Rutgers-Eagleton/NJMS Health Poll.

In a state famous for its turnpike and infamous for traffic, tolls and "Jersey drivers," a new partnership between the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll and Rutgers New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) has launched a series of public health polls with a survey about risky driving habits. New Jerseyans were asked about their perceptions of safety both as a driver and passenger.

"Three-quarters of New Jerseyans are behind the wheel nearly every day. They are continually at the center of jokes and have even been ranked as some of the worst drivers in the country," said David Redlawsk, director of the Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling (ECIP) and professor of political science. "The 'Jersey Driver' ID implies a certain impatience and rudeness to those outside of the state, and perhaps risky driving behavior, which makes the stereotype a great place to start our new

partnership."

As a passenger, about 90 percent of New Jerseyans rank reading as a driver's most dangerous activity, saying it would make them feel "very unsafe." A majority of residents also are concerned about the driver's [cell phone](#) use, although using a hands-free device significantly reduces concern. Eating or drinking by the drive makes just over half feel somewhat or very unsafe.

But respondents, when asked about their driving habits, admit to some of the same worrisome behaviors. Around half admit to at least occasionally eating, drinking or talking on a cell phone while driving. About 10 percent admit to sometimes reading phone messages or sending emails and text messages.

"In general, drivers are intolerant of behaviors perceived as risky or prone to cause distraction in other drivers, but many do engage in these behaviors themselves," said Andrea Marcus, an epidemiologist and assistant professor at the Rutgers School of Health Related Professions and the School of Public Health (SPH). "At the same time, virtually no residents admit to actually reading a book, newspaper or tablet while driving – perceived to be the most dangerous activity. And only 5 percent say they have nodded off at the wheel, even just briefly, in the past 30 days."

The Rutgers-Eagleton Health Series is collaboration between ECPIP (home of the Rutgers-Eagleton Poll) and NJMS. Driving questions were modeled after the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2011 National Phone Survey on Distracted Driving Attitudes and Behavior and the 2011-2012 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey. Results are from a statewide Rutgers-Eagleton Poll of 871 New Jerseyans contacted by live callers on both landlines and cell phones from July 28 to Aug. 5, 2014, with a margin of error of +/- 3.9

percentage points.

## **As passengers, New Jerseyans are cautious**

As passengers, respondents say they would feel unsafe if a driver performed many of a list of potentially unsafe activities. Reading a book, newspaper, or tablet is seen as very unsafe by nearly all Garden Staters. Reading emails or text messages follows closely behind with 87 percent calling such activity very unsafe, with another 9 percent saying it is "somewhat unsafe." These passenger perceptions do not vary by how often residents are on the road as drivers.

Drivers talking on a hand-held cell phone ranked a distant third in terms of unsafe activities, but it is still considered at least very unsafe by nearly 60 percent of respondents and somewhat unsafe by another quarter. However, a plurality of residents (45 percent) has no problem when drivers use a hands-free device; just 17 percent think this is very unsafe, while 22 percent say somewhat unsafe. The most frequent drivers are the most accepting of hands-free calling.

As passengers, residents are most accepting of eating or drinking; this practice is called unsafe by just over half, though only 23 percent see eating and drinking as very unsafe. Everyday drivers are somewhat more accepting of drivers eating and drinking compared to other drivers.

"New Jerseyans are right to be concerned about these behaviors," said Marian Passannante, an epidemiologist and professor at NJMS and SPH, and coordinator of an injury research and prevention group. "According to a recent study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the risk of a crash or near-crash among newly licensed drivers increases if they are dialing or reaching for a cell phone, sending or receiving text messages, or eating."

## As drivers, New Jerseyans are less safety-conscious

As drivers, New Jerseyans admit to some of the activities that concern them as passengers. They are most guilty of the habit that causes them the least concern – eating and drinking. Twelve percent admit to partaking on most or all trips, while another 40 percent say they do it on at least some trips. Similarly, respondents say they make or accept calls while driving: 17 percent do it all or most of the time, while another 30 percent does so at least occasionally.

Texting and emailing appears to be much less infrequent among drivers: About three-quarters claim they never text or email. Moreover, virtually no one admits to reading a book or other material while driving. However, everyday drivers are more likely to engage in these activities, with the exception of reading. Five percent of all drivers admit to having nodded off.

Redlawsk, however, cautions about potential underreporting of risky behaviors by drivers. "The reality is that people will underreport behaviors they know to be undesirable," he said. "In particular, we suspect self-reporting of the most dangerous behaviors, like falling asleep or even texting and reading email, understates the truth. As passengers, New Jerseyans see the risk. As drivers, they don't want to admit to taking those risks."

"It is a real problem for everyone on New Jersey roads if even 10 percent of drivers read or send email or texts while driving," added William Halperin, a physician and professor and chair of the Department of Preventive Professor at NJMS and the associate dean of the Newark Campus of SPH. "And the fact that 5 percent of [drivers](#) report falling asleep at the wheel in the last month is concerning. Just imagine the consequences. Phone calls, texting and 'drowsy driving' can and should be eliminated."

Provided by Rutgers University

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