

THE THIRD SURVEY OF ATTITUDES OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ON HIGHWAY AND AUTO SAFETY



**Prepared for
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety
September 1999**

**Conducted by
Louis Harris**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
A Word About This Study	1
<u>Executive Summary</u>	<u>3</u>
Public Desire for a Strong Federal Presence in Safety Matters Remains High	3
The American People Favor a Review of Basic Auto Safety Standards	3
Tightening Safety at Urban and Suburban Intersections for Cars and Pedestrians	3
More Frequent License Tests for Older and Younger Drivers Heavily Favored	4
A Polarizing Issue: The Claimed Danger of Sport Utility Vehicles	4
Installation of Safety Devices in Trucks Viewed as Urgent by Big Majorities	4
Support Exists for Mandating Spending More Federal Funds on Auto Safety	5
<u>Analysis</u>	<u>6</u>
A Record Majority of 93% Backs Federal Safety Regulations	6
Over Two in Three Feel the Time to Set New Auto Safety Standards Has Come	7
Pedestrians, Vehicles, and Urban Intersections: An Endangered Zone	7
More Frequent License Tests for Younger and Older People Meet with Approval	10
Claims About the Dangers of Sport Utility Vehicles	11
A Sizable 81% to 17% Majority Favors Cracking Down on Deaths from Truck Crashes	12
The Public Favors Increasing the Funding of Auto Safety at the Federal Level	12
The Questionnaire Annotated with Overall Results for Each Question	13

A WORD ABOUT THIS STUDY

This is the third major study conducted by Louis Harris for Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety on the attitudes of the American people on auto and highway safety. The first was conducted in May of 1996 and the second in May of 1998.

As in all the studies, a wide variety of high priority problems in highway and auto safety was probed. Some questions extended trend lines from identical questions asked in the first two surveys, others brought forward new probing in areas where ground had been broken before, and still others went into areas of inquiry for the first time.

One basic trend measured by public opinion is on the perceived role of the federal government in setting standards and rules in a variety of safety areas, not simply highway and auto safety. Yet another trend measured is attitude toward statewide use of red light cameras in enforcing respect for red signals at key urban and suburban intersections.

One new probe dealt with the question of whether or not the time was right to review auto safety standards set by the federal government, since 30 years have now passed without such a comprehensive review. Clearly, major changes have taken place in motor vehicles over these three decades.

Another dealt with the phenomenon of rising problems of dangerous intersections in urban and suburban centers, both for older pedestrians and motor vehicle occupants. The extent to which the public is prepared to give a much higher priority to actions taken to improve intersection safety for pedestrians and motor vehicle occupants was documented in this survey.

An area probed in the last survey, the rapidly expanding sport utility vehicle (SUV) market, was extended in this poll. People were asked directly how dangerous they feel SUVs are both as vehicles which cause serious damage in collisions with smaller cars, and also about the danger they might pose for owners because of the relative lack of stability and their risk of rollovers.

For the first time, the issue of how adequate are federal expenditures on auto safety compared, for example, with the amounts spent on airline safety was explored. People were asked if they wanted to see auto safety expenditures increased a great deal, increased somewhat less, stay where they are, or cut.

Finally, the cross-section was asked if they wanted to see more frequent tests for driver's licenses issued to younger drivers, as well as older drivers, both of whom have higher crash rates than

other age groups. Then the people were asked if they thought it was appropriate for all license-holders to be tested each time their driver's licenses were renewed.

In all, a national cross-section of 1,005 adults 18 years of age and over was surveyed by the Peter Harris Research Group, under contract to Louis Harris. The interviewing took place from August 17 through August 26, 1999.

Louis Harris personally wrote this questionnaire and accepts full responsibility for whatever might be criticized about it. Under the rule he has followed for many years, if one part of this survey is published, it all must be made public. Full disclosure is an important ingredient of well-conducted surveys. Mr. Harris is grateful to the officers and staff of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety for their obtaining needed briefing papers and background reports and being a most constructive client to deal with. At all times, they insisted that this study be conducted in the full objective and professional manner in which it was.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SPECIFIC AUTO AND HIGHWAY SAFETY FINDINGS

Public Desire for a Strong Federal Presence in Safety Matters Remains High

At a time when many in the nation's capital question the need for federal regulations, the public's appetite for strong rule-setting in consumer safety matters is universally high. Back in the 1996 survey, 87% of the American people called such federal concern and regulation "important." In last year's survey, the number rose marginally to 89%. In this latest 1999 survey, a record high 93% say it is "important." The public clearly rejects the alternative suggested in the question of "turning over such safety and health rule-setting to the states and localities." The need for universal standards in this vital safety area is as clear-cut as can be.

The American People Favor a Review of Basic Auto Safety Standards

The cross-section was informed that "it has been nearly 30 years since the first auto safety standards were set by the federal government. These standards must be met by the auto industry when they manufacture new vehicles, and some have been amended and upgraded over the years." It was then pointed out that "motor vehicles are different today -- generally bigger and more powerful -- with totally different designs." Then the people were asked if they felt "it would be wise to set new standards for auto safety, or should the old standards that have worked for 30 years not be changed." By a majority of 69% to 25%, a better than 2-to-1 majority of the American public believes the time has arrived to set new auto safety standards.

Tightening Safety at Urban and Suburban Intersections for Cars and Pedestrians

As America's population ages, more older people walk city and suburban streets to shop and exercise. With vehicles ignoring stop signs and red lights, crashes have proliferated. A sizable 85% of the public (84% in urban areas) feel "more attention should be paid to these safety problems, with a significant 57% who believe "much more attention is needed," giving the issue a sense of urgency. The increasing use of red light cameras by state and local authorities to catch drivers who jump red lights is now favored by a 74% to 23% majority, up from a comparable 65% to 30% majority just a year earlier. Measures such as changing traffic signal timing, adding left lane turns, and making signs less confusing all meet with substantial approval. All these results indicate this is an issue whose time has come.

More Frequent License Tests for Older and Younger Drivers Heavily Favored

Most people have a driving test only when they get a driver's license for the first time. However, more crashes and fatalities take place when younger and older drivers are at the wheel. In turn, this leads a 72% to 26% majority to favor "requiring more frequent license tests for younger drivers." A significant 69% to 30% of young people under 30 agree with this point of view. Similarly, a comparable 83% to 16% majority of the public supports "more frequent license tests for older drivers," a view supported by 80% of the elderly 65 and over and a larger 82% to 16% of those 50 to 64 years old. Given the backing of the young and the elderly, more frequent tests for drivers would appear to make such steps a consensus issue. However, when asked if they felt all drivers ought to be tested when they renew their licenses, a resounding 62% to 37% majority of the entire public comes down against this idea. Only among young people under 30 is the issue close, with a 50% to 49% majority who oppose them.

A Polarizing Issue: The Claimed Danger of Sport Utility Vehicles

The fastest growing segment of the automotive market is the sport utility vehicle (SUV), followed closely by pickup trucks and then by minivans. However, because they are bigger than other vehicles and can cause more damage when they are in a collision with smaller cars, and they are less stable and more prone to roll over, charges about the safety of SUVs also are growing apace. When asked how dangerous sport utility vehicles are, a 67% to 30% majority acknowledge that they are "dangerous." However, there is less intensity in this feeling than the overall results indicate. Only 19% feel SUVs are "very dangerous" and a much larger 48% feel they are "somewhat dangerous." Among SUV owners, only 7% feel they are "very dangerous" and 37% grudgingly admit they are "somewhat dangerous." A clear 55% deny they are "dangerous." Of course, a significant 70% of those who own traditional passenger vehicles believe SUVs are dangerous, indeed. Clearly, an increasingly intense polarization is likely to take place over this issue.

Installation of Safety Devices in Trucks Viewed as Urgent by Big Majorities

The fact that as many as 100 people a week are killed in truck-related crashes has shocked an 81% to 17% majority into believing that there should be mandatory installation of new technology in big trucks. Examples of technology include warnings to truck drivers when they are driving that they are fatigued and should pull over, and a black box that can record violations of federal safety regulations. Once again, the American public has indicated they have major and significant concerns about the truck safety issue.

Support Exists for Mandating Spending More Federal Funds on Auto Safety

At a time when increased federal spending is difficult to come by, it is significant that a 77% to 21% majority backs raising the amount the federal government spends on auto safety. There is no doubt that the comparison between the \$9 billion that is spent on airline safety and the much smaller \$300 million spent on auto safety adds fuel to the fire for backing auto safety hikes. However, at a time when increased federal spending is not the most popular course to take, it is well to point out that when people talk about increasing funding for auto safety, they want the amount to go up “somewhat” rather than “a great deal.”

ANALYSIS

A Record Majority of 93% Backs Federal Safety Regulations [See Graphic Chart](#)

In all three of the Harris surveys on highway and auto safety, the national cross-sections were asked:

“Let me ask you about some things the federal government does. In the past, the federal government has been concerned with setting strict rules about food and other product safety, highway and airlines safety, and safety on the job. Some people want to change all this and turn over such safety and health rule-setting to the states and localities, who can make decisions locally. Others say doing that would result in the end of uniform safety standards that people everywhere in the country can count on. How important do you feel it is for the federal government to be concerned with these areas of safety – very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all?”

IMPORTANCE OF FEDERAL CONCERN FOR PRODUCT SAFETY

	<u>1999</u>		<u>1998</u>		<u>1996</u>
	%		%		%
<u>Important</u>	<u>93</u>		<u>89</u>		<u>87</u>
Very important	61	65	61		
Somewhat important	32		24		26
<u>Not important</u>	<u>7</u>		<u>10</u>		<u>8</u>
Not very important	2		5		3
Not important at all	5		5		5
<u>Not sure</u>	<u>*</u>		<u>1</u>		<u>5</u>

Despite the overall decisiveness of the results, real differences can be found among key groups in the population. For example, while 65% of all women view such federal safety regulation as “very important,” no more than 56% of all men agree with them. Some 68% of those with a postgraduate degree see high importance to such regulation, compared with a lesser 57% of those who never went beyond high school. Compared with 63% of Democrats and 62% of independents who feel such regulation is “very important,” only 53% of all Republicans share this view. Among different types of vehicle owners, 62% of both van owners and smaller passenger cars feel such strict rule-keeping on safety is “very important,” a lesser 54% of SUV owners and 55% of pickup truck owners hold the same views. Both African Americans (66%) and Latinos (63%) feel more strongly about federal safety regulation than do whites who weigh in at 59% who feel it is “very important.”

Over Two in Three Feel the Time to Set New Auto Safety Standards Has Come

[See Graphics Chart](#)

By 69% to 25%, a clear-cut majority now believe it is “time to set new auto safety standards.” A minority of 1 in 4 believes the “old standards ought to be left alone.” Driving the conviction for a change is the realization that vehicles built today are vastly different than they were 30 years ago, when basic standards were set. Cars are bigger and more powerful, with radically different designs and technologies. In fact, there are some safety standards that need to be issued for the first time to address current safety problems. Once again, women feel more strongly about auto safety than men: 74% of the women want adoption of new standards, compared with a lower 64% of men. Interestingly enough, younger respondents (74%) feel more strongly about this issue than older people (55%). By region, 73% of those who live in the East as well as 73% in the South are more in support of adopting new auto safety standards than are other regions of the nation.

Pedestrians, Vehicles, and Urban Intersections: An Endangered Zone

[See Graphics Chart](#)

America’s population is aging. The Baby Boom generation will be considered elderly in another 10 years. Older people tend to walk more than others to shop and to exercise. By the same token, pedestrians, especially older people, are endangered at some intersections in cities and suburbs where drivers tend to ignore safety signs and red lights, and engineering fixes are needed. The dangers can be diminished by measures, such as changing traffic signal timing, adding left turn lanes, and making signs less confusing. Installation of red light cameras to supplement traffic enforcement is another solution that is growing in popularity.

Thus, the cross-section was asked the following question:
 “Do you feel much more attention should be paid to make dangerous intersections safer for pedestrians, somewhat more attention, or leave it as it is?”

CONCERN FOR DANGEROUS INTERSECTIONS

	Much More Attention Should Be Paid %	Somewhat More Attention Should Be Paid %	Leave It As Is %	Not Sure %
<u>Total Nation</u>	<u>57</u>	<u>28</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>*</u>
Men	52	27	21	*
Women	62	29	9	*
18-29 years-old	52	28	20	—
30-49	57	29	14	*
50-64	59	31	10	—
65 and over	60	25	13	2
Cities	56	28	16	*
Suburbs	57	29	14	*
Towns/rural	57	28	15	*

It is evident from these results that concern and a felt need for action in making dangerous intersections safer for pedestrians are substantial. Women feel the need more than men and the elderly and near-elderly more than younger people. Residents in cities, suburbs, towns and rural areas registered uniform support for action to improve intersections (56-57%), underscoring the importance of all segments.

Along with testing how urgent people feel about dangerous urban intersections, the survey also asked about the use of red light cameras to keep drivers from jumping red lights and endangering pedestrians and causing collisions.

The national cross-section was asked:
 “In some cities, red light cameras are used at busy intersections to identify license plates of drivers that run red lights. Warning signs are posted to alert drivers to the use of cameras and to deter drivers from running red lights. Would you favor or oppose a law in your state that would allow cities to develop red light camera programs, as a supplement to police enforcement?”

[See Graphics Chart](#)

SUPPORT FOR RED LIGHT CAMERA PROGRAMS

	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Not</u> <u>Sure</u>
	%	%	%
<u>Total Nation</u>	<u>74</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>3</u>
Men	69	29	2
Women	7	17	4
18-29 years-old	67	30	3
30-49	73	25	2
50-64	79	20	1
65 and over	81	11	8
Cities	72	25	3
Suburbs	72	25	3
Towns/rural	78	19	3
1999 result	74	23	3
1998 result	65	30	5

These results clearly show that as red light cameras increasingly are used in urban settings, support for their use also goes up. Early on, when the concept first surfaced, there were concerns among municipal leaders that there would be a serious backlash to the introduction of red light cameras. It appears that exposure to having red light cameras makes them more popular with the public. To be sure, backing for the cameras is highest among the elderly and lowest among young people. But a substantial two in every three young people under 30 favor the use of red light cameras. The fact that there is as much or more support for the use of the cameras outside the cities than inside is further indication of the widespread backing this innovation has acquired in a relatively short period of time.

More Frequent License Tests for Younger and Older People Meet With Approval

[See Graphics Chart](#)

Given the fact that a disproportionate share of auto crashes takes place when younger or older people are driving, sizable majorities of the public support more frequent license driving tests for these two age segments. However, when asked if all drivers should receive license tests when their licenses are renewed, a clear-cut 61% to 37% rejects that proposition.

The following table demonstrates dramatically that not only the public as a whole concurs with more frequent tests for the young and older drivers, but also opposes license tests for everyone at renewal time.

The cross-section was asked:
 “Most people have a driving test only when they get a driver’s license for the first time. However, fatality rates for younger and older drivers are higher than the general population. Would you favor or oppose requiring more frequent license tests for younger drivers, or not? Would you favor or oppose requiring more frequent license tests for older drivers, or not? Would you favor or oppose requiring license tests for all drivers each time they renew their driver’s licenses, or not?”

ATTITUDES TOWARD MORE FREQUENT AUTO LICENSE TESTS

	<i>For Younger Drivers</i>		<i>For Older Drivers</i>		<i>For All Drivers at License Renewal</i>	
	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>Favor</u>	<u>Oppose</u>
	%	%	%	%	%	%
<u>Total Nation</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>26</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>16</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>62</u>
<u>By Age</u>						
18-29	69	30	87	13	49	50
30-49	74	24	86	13	36	63
50-64	69	30	82	16	29	69
65 and over	78	20	80	19	32	67

Claims About the Dangers of Sport Utility Vehicles

One of the most phenomenal developments in tastes in automobiles in America over the past few years has been the rise in sales of sport utility vehicles. Sales have risen sharply and show little sign of abating. At the same time, recent reports about the dangers of SUVs have received increasing notice. When involved in collisions, the bigger SUVs inflict serious damage on smaller cars. In addition, SUVs are less stable in their construction, making them more vulnerable to rollover dangers, especially at higher speeds.

The cross-section was asked:

“The fastest-selling cars in America are sport utility vehicles. They are bigger than other vehicles, and when they hit other cars, they can cause serious damage. Also, sport utility vehicles have had rollover problems when they take too sharp turns, endangering the occupants of the cars. All in all, how dangerous do you feel sport utility vehicles are – very dangerous, somewhat dangerous, not very dangerous, or not dangerous at all?”

HOW DANGEROUS ARE SPORT UTILITY VEHICLES?

	Very <u>Dangerous</u> %	Somewhat <u>Dangerous</u> %	Not Very <u>Dangerous</u> %	Not at <u>All</u> %	Not <u>Sure</u> %
<u>Total Nation</u>	<u>19</u>	<u>48</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>2</u>
Own a van	14	47	22	13	4
Own a pick up truck	17	45	22	14	2
Own a sport utility vehicle	7	37	29	26	1
Own a passenger car	20	50	19	18	3
Men	16	42	26	14	2
Women	22	54	15	5	4
18-29 years-old	11	52	27	8	1
30-49	16	47	22	14	1
50-64	30	41	17	6	1
65 and over	29	51	9	5	6

Overall, a 67% to 30% majority believes sport utility vehicles are “dangerous.” However, only 19% think they are “very dangerous” and a much larger 48% feel they are “somewhat dangerous.” Significantly, of course, a majority of 55% to 44% of those who own an SUV does not believe they own a dangerous vehicle. But it is significant also that more than 4 out of 10 SUV owners regard their vehicles as dangerous. And the likelihood is that most who feel their vehicle is dangerous are thinking about the potential dangers to other, smaller cars in case of collision, not the dangers to themselves due to the susceptibility of their vehicle to rollover. By contrast, owners of smaller passenger cars, by 70% to 27% do feel SUVs are “dangerous,” no doubt worrying about any collision with one.

Again, as throughout this report, women (76%) are more likely than men (58%) to see danger in SUVs. There is also a distinct age pattern: those below 30 (63%) and those 30-49 (63%) are less prone to worry about SUVs as “dangerous” than are those 50-64 (71%) and those 65 and over (80%). But it is also evident that all age groups see a problem, with two out of three under age 50 expressing concern. Clearly, there is much polarization on this issue. It is a classic stand-off between the popularity of a specific type of vehicle, on the one hand, and the warning signals being issued by auto safety experts and proponents, on the other.

A Sizable 81% to 17% Majority Favors Cracking Down on Deaths From Truck Crashes

The American people are clearly alarmed about the number of truck-related crashes (100 per week) and the contributing role that fatigue plays among truck drivers. The installation of technology in trucks that will help stem this tide is favored by a decisive 81% to 17% majority. If public support were the main motivation for action in this area, mandatory installation of such technology – black boxes and warning signals to fatigued drivers – would take place in short order.

The Public Favors Increasing the Funding of Auto Safety at the Federal Level

[See Graphics Chart](#)

A substantial 77% to 21% majority favors increasing the federal budget dedicated to auto safety. However, only 28% want to increase the current \$300 million expenditure “a great deal.” Instead, 49% support allowing auto safety spending to “go up somewhat,” with 17% wanting it to stay at current levels and only 4% who want the spending to diminish. The survey indicates that probably the most powerful argument on behalf of increasing auto safety funding at the federal level is a comparison of how relatively small current funding is versus the \$9 billion being spent on airline safety by the federal government.