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May 27, 2003

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Poll: Drivers admit to frequent, dangerous behaviors on the road

*'Drive for Life' initiative challenges Americans
to retest their driving knowledge*

WASHINGTON – A new national poll reveals that drivers themselves – more than traffic conditions or vehicles – are the greatest safety threat on the road. American drivers admit they knowingly and routinely engage in careless driving behavior and dangerous driving practices.

And the poll revealed it's the harried, hurried, distracted drivers in the middle – people ages 26-44 – who admit to the most dangerous driving habits. The Mason-Dixon Polling and Research Inc. poll of driver attitudes and behaviors was commissioned by "**Drive for Life: The National Safe Driving Test & Initiative**," a coalition of highway safety experts and advocates.

"Safety requires three things: safe cars, safe roads and safe drivers," said **Susan Pikrallidas**, AAA's vice president for Public Affairs. "So far, the focus has been on making cars and roads safer. But driving is a complex task and many of us have very poor driving habits. Fortunately, bad driving habits can be fixed and each one of us can fix our part of the problem."

"**Drive for Life**" will be instrumental in providing a solution. Noting that most drivers haven't passed a driving test since they first learned to drive, the coalition has launched an ambitious nationwide initiative challenging drivers to voluntarily retest their driving knowledge and change their risky behavior – and they're making it simple for drivers to take the "test."

"**Drive for Life: The National Safe Driving Test & Initiative**" is the new campaign headed by the American Automobile Association, Volvo Cars of North America and Partners for Highway Safety in partnership with other safety, law enforcement and education groups. The initiative was launched at a National Press Club news conference Tuesday.

The project will provide opportunities for Americans to reassess their driving knowledge through:

- An interactive Web site (www.safedrivingtest.com), where, among other things, visitors can brush up on safe driving practices with a quick test, take a driving personality quiz, and learn about the keys to safe driving;

- A 30-minute national television special – scheduled to air in late summer and also in public schools – that tests viewers’ knowledge of safe driving practices and encourages millions of drivers of all ages to be more alert and attentive drivers; and,
- A renewed national focus on improving drivers’ skills, decision-making and awareness.

The poll revealed that Americans believe cars are safer – but that drivers are more dangerous. Of those polled, 81 percent said they believe cars are safer, 57 percent said roads are safer, but only 27 percent said that drivers are safer than in the past.

Vic Doolan, president and CEO of Volvo Cars of North America, LLC – which is a partner in the campaign – said that "**Drive For Life**" is consistent with Volvo core values. "We pride ourselves on building one of the safest cars on the road," said Doolan. "By partnering with the 'Drive for Life' campaign we take our commitment to safety one step further – initiatives to improve driving behavior."

The poll also found that:

- A clear majority of all drivers (71 percent) – even seniors – speed, and most believe it’s OK to routinely exceed the speed limit by 5 mph. Nearly 1 in 3 men believe it’s OK to exceed the speed limit by 10 mph.
- Most drivers engage in one or more other activities while driving. For instance, 59 percent of drivers say they eat while they drive; 37 percent say they talk on a cell phone while driving; 14 percent even read while driving.

“These findings clearly show that almost every driver has engaged in a risk behavior at least once in the past six months,” said **Brad Coker**, who directed the poll for Mason-Dixon. “In fact, more than 90 percent nationwide freely admitted it.”

The same behaviors poll respondents admitted to are among the top reasons cited by experts for traffic crashes and fatalities. And National Highway Traffic Safety Administration studies suggest that driver inattention is a primary or contributing factor in as many as 50 percent of all crashes.

“The needless deaths on America’s streets, roads and highways this past Memorial Day weekend and the poll confirm the pressing need for such an initiative,” said Florida **Attorney General Charlie Crist**, a partner in the initiative. “The simple fact is, most highway fatalities can be avoided.”

Indy Racing League star **Greg Ray**, fresh from competing in the Indianapolis 500, is the celebrity spokesman for “**Drive for Life**.” He said common driving mistakes include failing to pay attention or “zoning out,” speeding, making assumptions about what other drivers are going to do, driving aggressively, and driving while drowsy, upset or distracted.

“The most basic – and violated – safety rule is to pay attention, to watch what’s going on around you,” said Ray. “At the speeds I travel on a race track, if I take my focus off the road for a fraction of a second, it can be fatal. Street drivers need to know that their attention to what’s happening is just as crucial.”

Interestingly, most Americans polled believe that, despite their own troublesome driving behavior, the dangerous driver on the road is somebody else: 77 percent said seniors should be periodically retested and 69 percent favored retesting for teens. In fact, a majority (57 percent) even favored raising the driving age to 18. Yet, drivers ages 26-44 admitted to the most dangerous behaviors on the road.

“We worry about the car, the weather, the driver in front or behind us. But we don’t spend nearly enough time worrying about our own driving habits,” said Bill Johnson, executive director of the partnering National Association of Police Organizations. “The truth is there are important – and different – safety issues throughout a driver’s lifespan. If we’re aware of them, we can compensate and be safer drivers.”

For instance, Johnson noted that:

- Teen drivers are less experienced and may be more prone to take risks. They may be distracted by friends in the car, stereo equipment or cellular phones. According to the poll, drivers ages 25 and younger were the most likely to speed and to turn without signaling.
- Young and middle-aged adult drivers may be rushed and pressed for time. They may be distracted “within their heads” by work and family obligations and “within their cars” by children or cellular phones. In the poll, drivers ages 26-44 were most likely to ignore vehicle maintenance (1 in 4), drive through a red or yellow light (more than 1 in 3), drive without a seat belt (1 in 3), use a cell phone (more than half), read while driving, (1 in 5), eat while driving (nearly 3 of 4). They were the age group most likely to think it’s OK to drive 10 mph over the speed limit (nearly 1 in 3). They also were the age group most likely to drive while experiencing intense frustration (nearly 1 in 3).
- Older drivers may have diminished vision or hearing and slower response times. They may be less comfortable driving at high speeds, on crowded highways or in unfamiliar areas. The poll showed that, overall, seniors tend to drive more carefully and with fewer distractions. Still, even among seniors, nearly 57 percent admit to speeding and 38.5 percent say they eat while driving.

In 2002, traffic deaths were at their highest level since 1990: 42,850 people died in traffic deaths last year, a 1.7 percent increase over the previous year. As the poll confirms, a lack of driver awareness and education are the final frontier of road safety.

“So much of what we do behind the wheel is subconscious, and most people take driving and their responsibilities for granted,” said **Paul Burris**, president of Partners for Highway Safety, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising public awareness about the preventability of highway deaths and the urgent need to better prepare young people for the responsibilities of driving. “All of us, regardless of age, need to be fully aware that no matter what, safe driving demands concentration and full attention at all times.”

Ironically, although most drivers polled rate their knowledge of traffic rules as good or excellent, highway safety experts doubt that drivers know as much as they think they do.

“I’ll bet many adults would not pass their state’s written driving test if they took it today, any more than they could pass an algebra or chemistry test if they hadn’t cracked a book since high school,” said **Ron Sachs**, executive producer of the initiative’s television special. “Through our television special, ‘Drive for Life’ will challenge Americans to test themselves and see if their knowledge matches their confidence.”

“**Drive for Life**” partners also include the National Sheriffs’ Association.

The survey was conducted by Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc. from May 13 to 16, 2003. A total of 1,100 licensed drivers, aged 16 and older, were interviewed by telephone. The margin for error is plus or minus 3 percentage points.



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