

# Traffic Safety Culture in the United States: Research Update

How many people die in traffic crashes? Survey says...“I don’t know.”

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## Objective

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To assess Americans’ knowledge of the annual human toll of motor vehicle crashes in the United States.

## Background

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Motor vehicle traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for all Americans between two and thirty-four years of age.<sup>1</sup> In 2006, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 42,642 people were killed in motor vehicle traffic crashes. This includes all drivers, passengers, and non-motorists who died within 30 days of and as a result of a crash involving a motor vehicle in transport on a public roadway. The number of people who have died each year from motor vehicle traffic crashes has been very stable for over a decade. For example, 42,065 people died in motor vehicle traffic crashes in 1996, and from 1996 through 2006, the lowest number of fatalities in any given year was 41,501 (in 1998) and the highest was 43,510 (in 2005). Since the federal government began compiling statistics on motor vehicle traffic fatalities in 1966, there has been only one year in which the total number of fatalities was lower than 40,000 (1992; 39,250 fatalities).<sup>2</sup>

In 2006, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety commissioned over twenty research papers from top experts representing a wide variety of disciplines, addressing the issue of why it is that the United States continues to accept this death toll year after year and what can be done to change that. Those papers were published in 2007 in a compendium titled *Traffic Safety Culture in the United States: The Journey Forward*.<sup>3</sup> One recommendation that emerged from multiple articles in this compendium was that the United States should monitor the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of the American public—as they relate to this issue of “traffic safety culture”—on an ongoing basis. In response to these recommendations, in 2007 the AAA Foundation initiated a program of surveying the American public about a wide variety of issues relevant to traffic safety and “safety culture.” A selection of findings from the first of these surveys is reported here. Additional results from the survey will be reported in the coming months.

## Methodology

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The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety commissioned NuStats LLC to conduct a telephone survey of the American public to explore public knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to motor vehicle traffic safety. A telephone survey of 2,509 U.S. adults was conducted, via landline and cellular telephone, in English and in Spanish, from October 25, 2007 through January 10, 2008. Responses were weighted to represent all U.S. adults accessible via telephone.

Included in the survey was the question,

*“About how many people do you think died last year from motor vehicle accidents in the United States? Even if you don’t know the exact number, please just give me your best guess.”*

Responses to this question are presented here.

## Findings

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The table below shows respondents’ estimates of how many people died last year in motor vehicle traffic crashes. The response frequencies and percentages shown here have been weighted so that the survey sample is representative of all adults in the United States who are accessible via telephone.

<b>Estimated fatalities</b>	<b>Responses (Weighted)</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>10,000 or fewer</b>	675	27.1
<b>10,001 – 20,000</b>	215	8.6
<b>20,001 – 30,000</b>	121	4.9
<b>30,001 – 40,000</b>	50	2.0
<b>40,001 – 50,000</b>	158	6.3
<b>50,001 – 60,000</b>	35	1.4
<b>60,001 – 70,000</b>	9	0.4
<b>70,001 – 80,000</b>	29	1.2
<b>80,001 – 90,000</b>	7	0.3
<b>90,001 – 100,000</b>	210	8.4
<b>Over 100,000</b>	353	14.2
<b>"I don't know"</b>	630	25.3
<b>Total responses</b>	2,493	100.0

Also of note, the median estimate was 30,000 fatalities, the single most frequent numeric estimate (mode) was 100,000 fatalities (11.5 percent of numeric estimates and 8.3 percent of all responses including “I don’t know”), and a small percentage of responses were over one million fatalities (4.5 percent of numeric estimates and 3.3 percent of all responses). Only 52.8 percent of responses were within a factor of ten of the “correct” answer of approximately 43,000 fatalities (i.e., between 4,300 and 430,000), only 14.6 percent of responses were within 50 percent of 43,000 fatalities (i.e., between 21,500 and 64,500), and only 6.3 percent of responses were between 40,001 and 50,000 fatalities. The single most common response was “I don’t know,” which garnered over one fourth of all responses.

## Conclusions

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The American public is broadly unaware of the number of people killed each year in motor vehicle traffic crashes.

## Key Points

- ✓ Approximately 43,000 people die each year in motor vehicle traffic crashes in the United States.
- ✓ When asked to estimate the number of people killed last year in motor vehicle traffic crashes, the single most frequent answer given by members of the American public was “I don’t know.”
- ✓ Only 6.3 percent of respondents were able to estimate the number of people killed each year in traffic crashes to between 40,001 and 50,000.
- ✓ Only about one in seven respondents was able to estimate the number of people killed in traffic crashes each year to within fifty percent (i.e., between 21,500 and 64,500).
- ✓ Only slightly more than half of respondents were able to estimate the number of people killed in traffic crashes each year *to within a factor of ten* (i.e., between 4,300 and 430,000).

## References

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