

# It's the Little Things: How Seemingly Small Choices Affect Safety on the Road

April 2022

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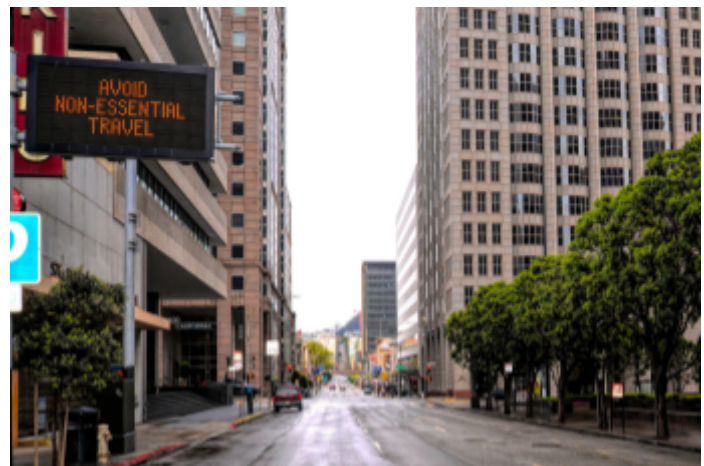
*Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco*

With most Americans tucked into home offices and sheltered in living rooms during the height of the pandemic, stretches of highway and neighborhood roads were quiet. No bustle of cars, trucks, buses, or bikes. Empty. And yet, [38,680 people died](#) in vehicle crashes in 2020—the highest traffic-related death count since 2007. Why did traffic fatalities spike with fewer drivers on the roads?

The answer: Impaired, distracted, and aggressive driving.

Daily driving trips made during April 2020 decreased by approximately [42 percent](#). And even in the second half of 2020, daily trips remained [20 percent](#) lower than rates the previous year. The facts show that most people were driving less, and, looking back, we can all remember the eerie barrenness of roads when we made those infrequent necessary supply runs. But it is not only when and how often we drive that matters; the way we drive makes all the difference.

Drivers on the road during the height of the pandemic made choices that led to the highest fatality rate documented in more than a decade.



*Financial District, San Francisco*

[Research](#) from the [American Automobile Association](#) (AAA) reveals that many drivers—during the pandemic—were more likely to speed, intentionally run red lights, read texts, drive without wearing seat belts, change lanes aggressively, and/or drive after using drugs or alcohol. There were fewer drivers on the road and yet *more* people dying—thus illustrating the critical impact of our driving choices. Making safe choices makes a difference. **Wearing seat belts [reduces](#) the risk of death by 45% and [cuts](#) the risk of serious injury by 50% for drivers and front-seat passengers.**

Along with choosing to wear a seatbelt, drivers are regularly confronted with another potentially fatal choice: whether or not to respond to their cell phone ping.

The [National Highway Transportation Safety Administration](#) (NHTSA) [data](#) shows that texting and other cell phone use radically [increases the likelihood](#) of being involved in a traffic accident. 2020 NHTSA data estimates that [7.9 percent](#) of drivers were using a cellphone while driving—but much of this data is based on self-report, and the true number may be higher.

Another preventable yet often-fatal risky driving behavior is speeding. Even small speed increases are enough to raise a [driver's risk](#) of severe injury and death. A collision at 70 mph is **four times** more likely to result in a fatality than a crash at 45 mph, according to [NHTSA](#).

AAA also explains that drivers tend to [overestimate](#) the time they are saving by going over the speed limit. How many miles do you estimate you would need to travel to save 5-minutes when driving at 80 mph, versus 75 mph? The answer: **100**. When you're on the road, remember to slow down. It's not worth the risk.

When behind the wheel, make responsible choices. Your life depends on it.