

# Distracted teens behind the wheel

## Purpose

In July 2020, the State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company (State Farm®) Enterprise Research Department conducted an online survey with teens age 16-19 to examine their attitudes and behaviors regarding the use of smartphones while driving. This report highlights findings from this research. *Note: A number of changes were made to the survey research in 2020 such that results in this report should not be compared with the results in the 2016 “Teens, Smartphones, and Distracted Driving” report also produced by State Farm.*

## Summary

**Nearly nine out of ten teenage drivers say they engage in at least one smartphone behavior while driving.**

For example, two-thirds of teens say they program a navigation app while driving, and just under half say they read text messages or talk on a hand-held phone when behind the wheel. Distracting phone behaviors tend to be more prevalent among older teens (age 18-19) or those who drive more often (i.e., over five hours a week), reinforcing the need to continue to educate young drivers on the dangers of distracted driving. Teens who reported using a smartphone while driving were also more likely to report other risky driving behaviors.

**Parents may also be influencing their teenage children,** as teens who said their parents use cellphones while driving were significantly more likely to engage in each phone activity (except using hands-free devices) than those who said their parents did not use cellphones while driving. Further, teens with parents who set and enforced driving rules or monitored driving were less likely than others to engage in several of the phone activities when behind the wheel.

**Teens report using phones while driving despite finding such activities distracting and despite believing they can increase the likelihood of an accident.** For example, 90 percent of teenagers believe reading or updating social media while driving is distracting, yet over one-third (36 percent) report doing it anyway. In addition, two-thirds of teens believe manually interacting with a phone while driving greatly increases the likelihood of an auto accident.

**Teens who have been in an accident have a higher tendency to use their phone when behind the wheel.**

Sixteen percent of teens surveyed said they had been involved in at least one auto accident as a driver where they had been determined to be at fault. These teens were significantly more likely to report participating in each of the distracted phone behaviors while driving than teens who had not been in a motor vehicle accident.

The majority of teens who reside in states where the use of hand-held phones or texting is illegal for all drivers were aware of such laws. But, there was a sizeable percentage who were unaware of their state's laws and could benefit from additional education. **Yet, laws alone may not be as effective in deterring phone behavior among young drivers as measures imposing large monetary fines or license suspensions.**

**Many teens reported driving a vehicle equipped with an advanced safety feature such as Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist.** Not only were these teens significantly more likely to say they engaged in each of the distracted smartphone behaviors while driving than those who drove a vehicle without any of the three safety features, but many also **said they would feel comfortable taking their eyes off the road to focus on other tasks when the safety device was active** – a dangerous scenario should driving conditions change and require swift action from the driver.

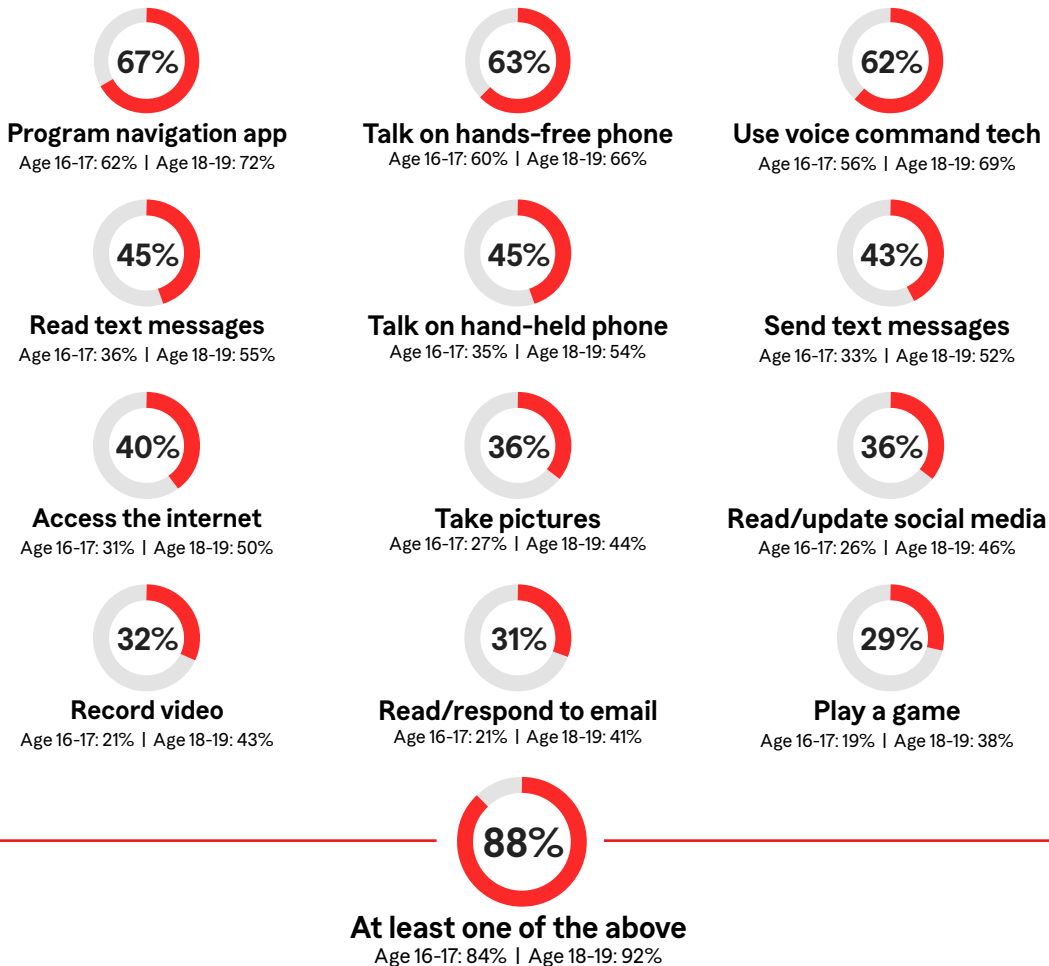
## Nearly nine out of ten teens say they engage in at least one smartphone behavior while driving

Age greatly influenced the reported rate of distracted behaviors. Teens age 18-19 were significantly more likely than those age 16-17 to say they engaged in each of the 12 behaviors studied.

Teens who reported driving more than five hours per week were also significantly more likely to participate in each distracted behavior (except for playing games) than those driving five hours or less each week. In addition, teens who reported having a license the longest were the most likely to engage in seven of the 12 distracted behaviors (see the Appendix).

Parental action may also be influencing teen behavior. Teens who said their parents use cellphones while driving were significantly more likely to engage in each activity (except using hands-free devices) than those who said their parents rarely or never use cellphones while driving. Lastly, teens who said their parents set and enforce rules for their driving or their parents monitor their driving were more likely to say they “never” talk on a hand-held phone, send or read text messages, or program a navigation app while driving than teens whose parents rarely or never set/enforce driving rules or monitor their driving.

### Percent of teens who participate in smartphone activities while driving



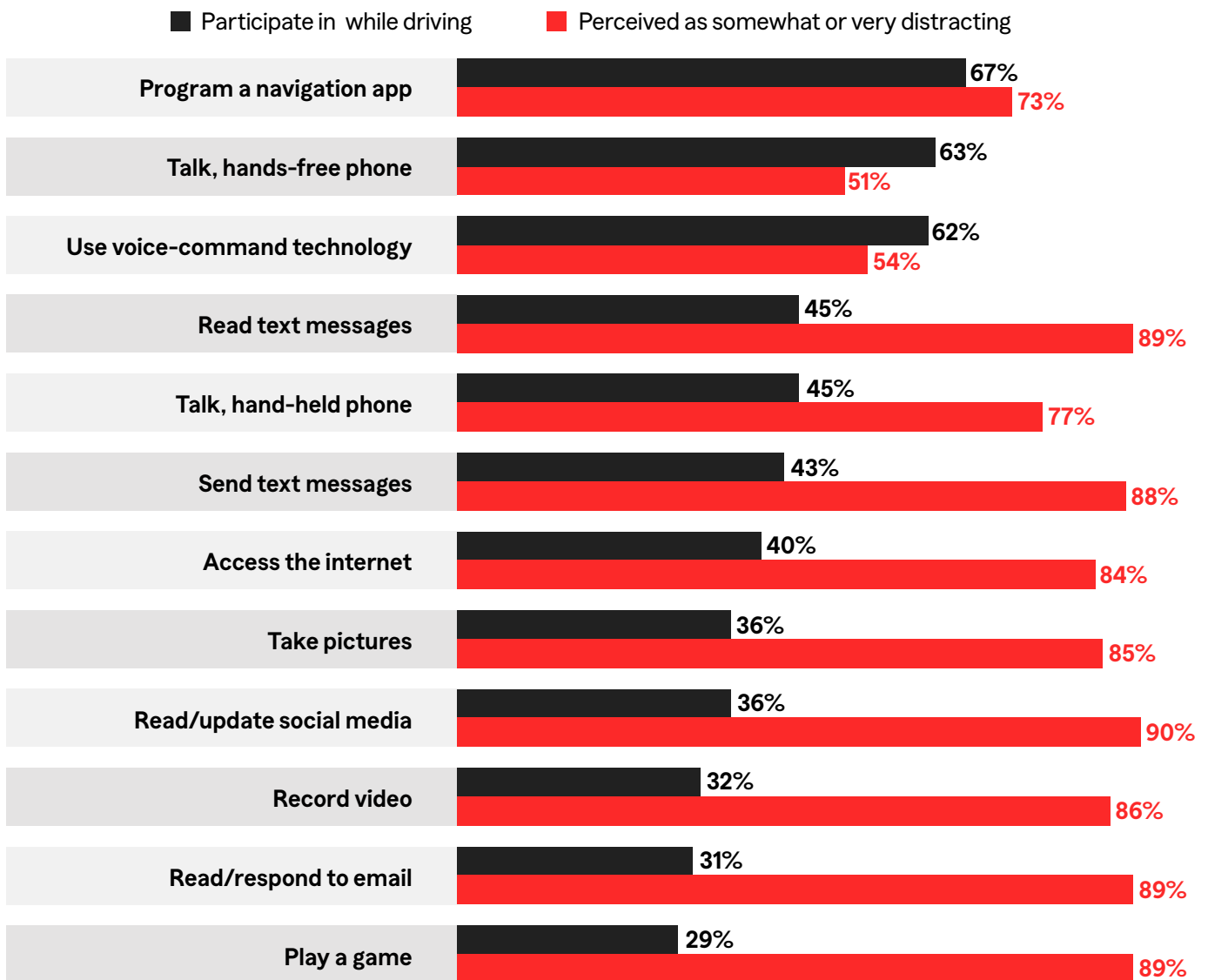
All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone). Participate was defined as respondents selecting “Always,” “Frequently,” or “Sometimes” when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving. Other response options included “Rarely” and “Never.” Base: All Teens (n=997).

## Teens report using their smartphone while driving even though they view them as distracting.

At least three-quarters of teens found each of the phone activities to be somewhat or very distracting (with the exception of talking on a hands-free device, where just over half (51 percent) found the activity distracting, or using voice-command technology (54 percent)).

Yet, many teens participate in these activities despite finding them distracting. For example, 45 percent said they read text messages while driving even though 89 percent find it distracting. Similarly, over one-third (36 percent) report reading/ updating social media while driving, yet 90 percent find the behavior distracting.

### Percent of teen drivers who perceive activities as distracting and percent who participate in them



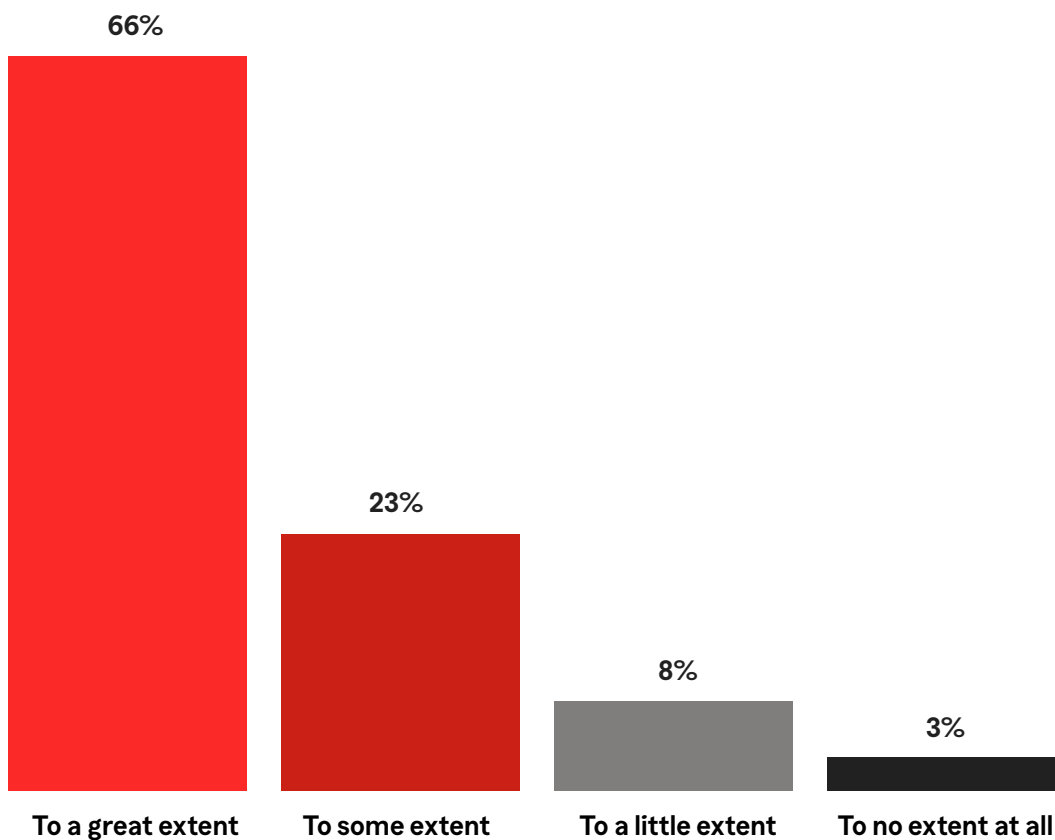
All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone). For the question asking how distracting these activities are, other response options included "Not at all distracting" and "Don't know." Those who responded "Don't know" were excluded from the analysis for that particular activity. Base sizes ranged from 921 to 958. Base size for Participate While Driving (n=997).

## Not only do teens perceive smartphone activities to be distracting when driving, most also believe such behavior increases the likelihood of an accident.

Two-thirds of teens believe manually interacting with a phone while driving greatly increases the likelihood of an accident, while another one-quarter think the chances of an accident increase “to some extent.”

Younger teens (i.e., age 16-17) and those whose parents rarely or never use their phones while driving were more likely than others to say manually manipulating a phone while driving increases the likelihood of an accident “to a great extent.”

**“To what extent do you think manual interactions with a cellphone while driving increases the likelihood that you will be involved in an accident?”**



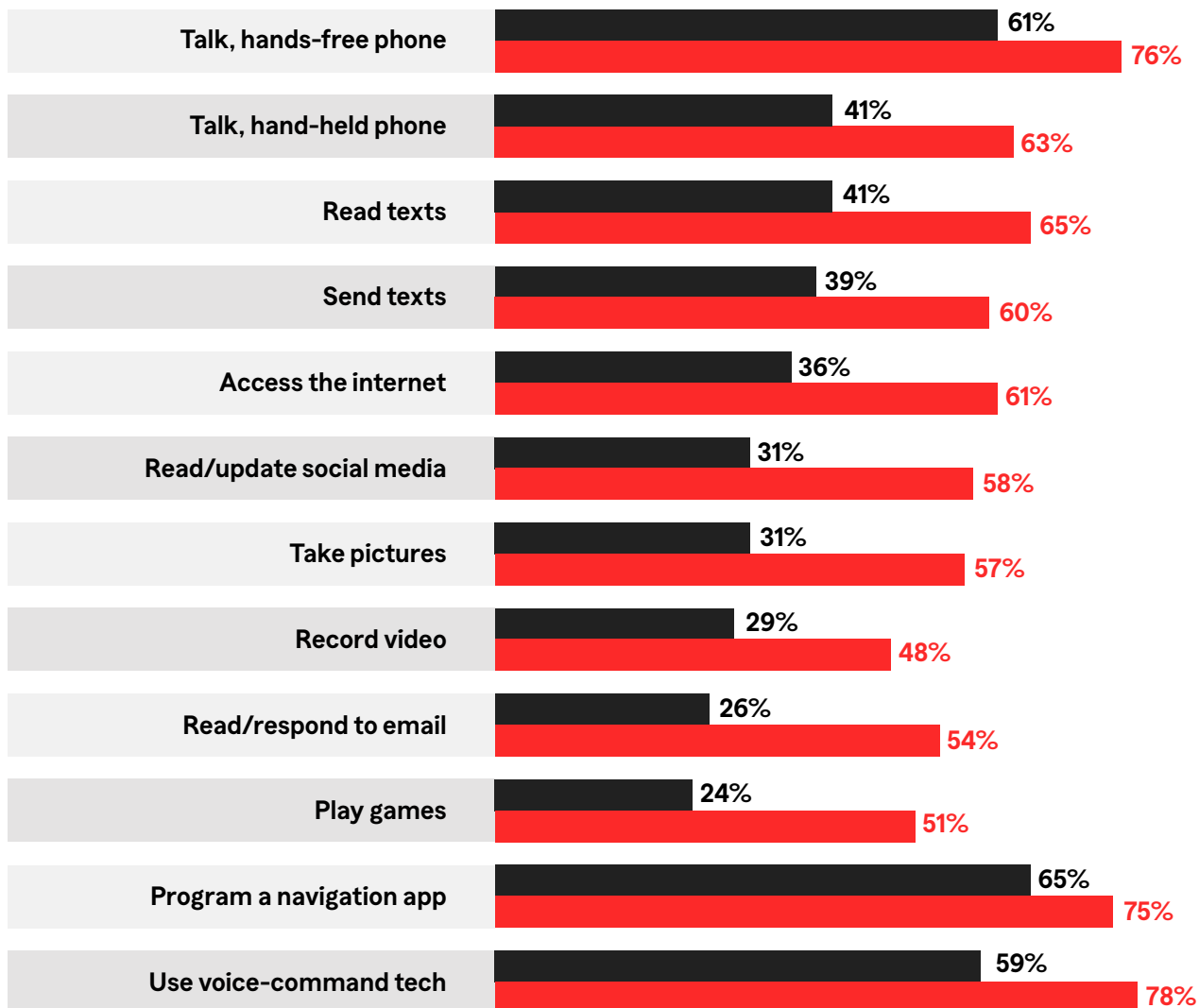
Examples of “manual interactions” were provided to survey respondents and included “texting, sending emails, playing video games, updating social media, etc.” Those who responded “Don’t know” to the question (or n=20) were excluded from the analysis shown above. Base size: n=977.

## Using a smartphone while driving can increase the risk of an auto accident, yet teens who have been in an accident have a higher tendency to use their phone when behind the wheel.

Sixteen percent of teens surveyed said they had been involved in at least one auto accident as a driver where they had been determined to be at fault. Despite their accident history, the teens who had been in a prior crash were significantly more likely to report participating in each of the distracted behaviors while driving than teens who had not been in an at-fault accident.

### Activities teens say they participate in while driving by whether or not the teen has been involved in an at-fault auto accident

■ Teens who have not been in an at-fault accident ■ Teens who have been in one or more at-fault accidents



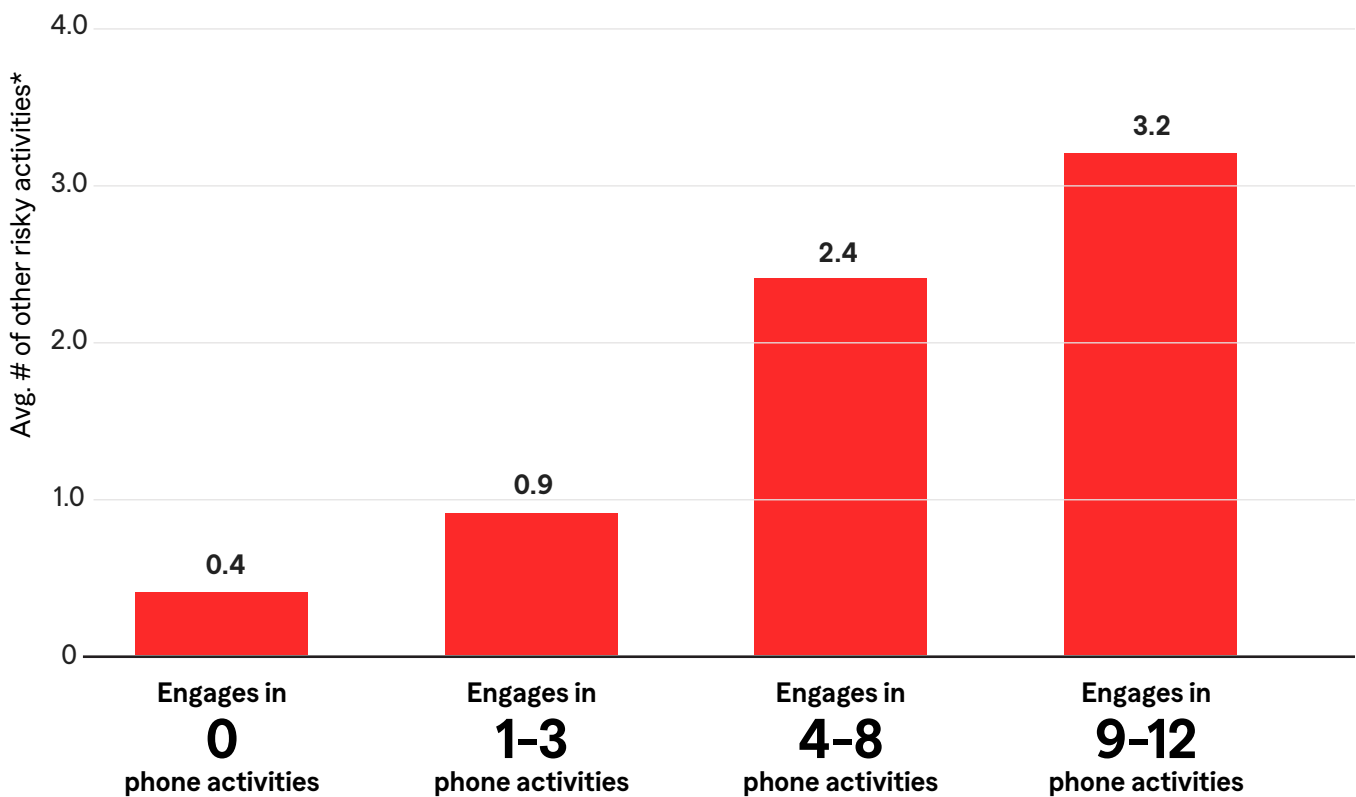
All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone). Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving. Other response options included "Rarely" and "Never." Respondents who said they "Don't know/Can't remember" the number of auto accidents they had been involved in where they were determined to be at fault were excluded from the analysis shown above.  
 Base sizes: Teens Who Have Not Been in an At-Fault Accident (n=826); Teens Who Have Been in 1+ At-Fault Accidents (n=161)

## Many teens also say they engage in other potentially dangerous behaviors, besides smartphone usage, while driving.

In addition to the distracted phone behaviors, teens were also asked about their participation in ten other potentially dangerous driving activities: speeding, driving drowsy, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, failing to use turn signals, failing to wear a seat belt, racing, weaving, cutting another driver off, running a red light or stop sign, and self-grooming. Many teens reported engaging in these other dangerous driving behaviors. In fact, the more phone activities teens said they engaged in while driving, the more of these additional risky behaviors they mentioned as well.

Furthermore, teens who had been in a prior auto accident were much more likely to exhibit these other dangerous driving behaviors than teens who had not been involved in an accident (see the Appendix for more detail).

**Average number of other risky activities teens say they participate in by number of phone activities they participate in while driving**



\*Other risky activities included speeding, driving drowsy, driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, failing to use turn signals, failing to wear a seat belt, racing, weaving, cutting another driver off, running a red light or stop sign, and self-grooming.

Respondents were considered to participate in an activity if they selected "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving.

Base sizes: 0 phone activities (n=119); 1-3 phone activities (n=343); 4-8 phone activities (n=242); 9-12 phone activities (n=293).

## Teens could benefit from additional education about their state laws involving phone use while driving.

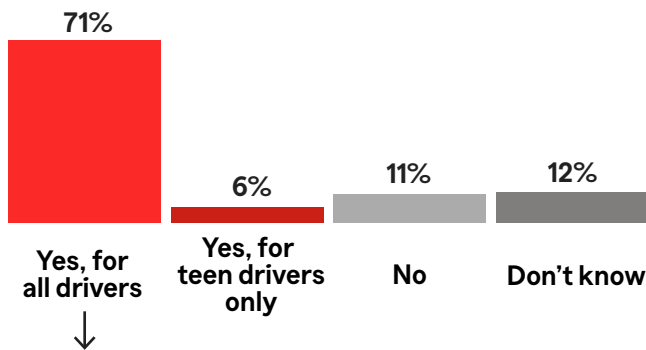
Roughly two dozen states have laws banning the use of hand-held smartphones while driving for *all* drivers (regardless of age). While most teens residing in these states were aware of such laws, roughly three in ten were not – with 11% saying hand-held phone use was not banned at all.

Similarly, all states (except for Missouri and Montana) prohibit *all* drivers from texting while driving. Yet only 76% of teens were aware of such laws.

Among teens who were aware of their state laws banning hand-held phone use or texting while driving, only about one-third felt such laws were effective, while nearly half believed such laws were ineffective in discouraging the distracted behavior.

### “To your knowledge, does your state/local law prohibit \_\_\_\_\_ while driving?”

#### Hand-held cellphones\*

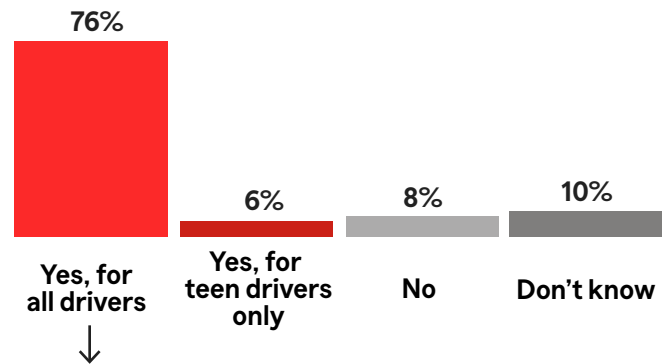


“How effective is your state/local law in preventing drivers from using a hand-held cellphone while driving?”

	% Responding
Very/Somewhat Effective	33%
Neither Effective nor Ineffective	18%
Very/Somewhat Ineffective	49%

Base: Respondents who live in a state where hand-held cellphone use while driving is banned for all drivers AND who correctly said such behavior is prohibited for all drivers. (n=325)

#### Texting\*\*



“How effective is your state/local law in preventing drivers from texting while driving?”

	% Responding
Very/Somewhat Effective	34%
Neither Effective nor Ineffective	20%
Very/Somewhat Ineffective	46%

Base: Respondents who live in a state where texting while driving is prohibited for all drivers AND who correctly said such behavior is prohibited for all drivers. (n=731)

\*Only includes respondents from states in which hand-held cellphone use while driving is banned for all drivers (AZ, CA, CT, DC, DE, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, ME, MD, MA, MN, NV, NH, NJ, NY, OR, RI, SD, TN, VT, WA, WV). (n=457)

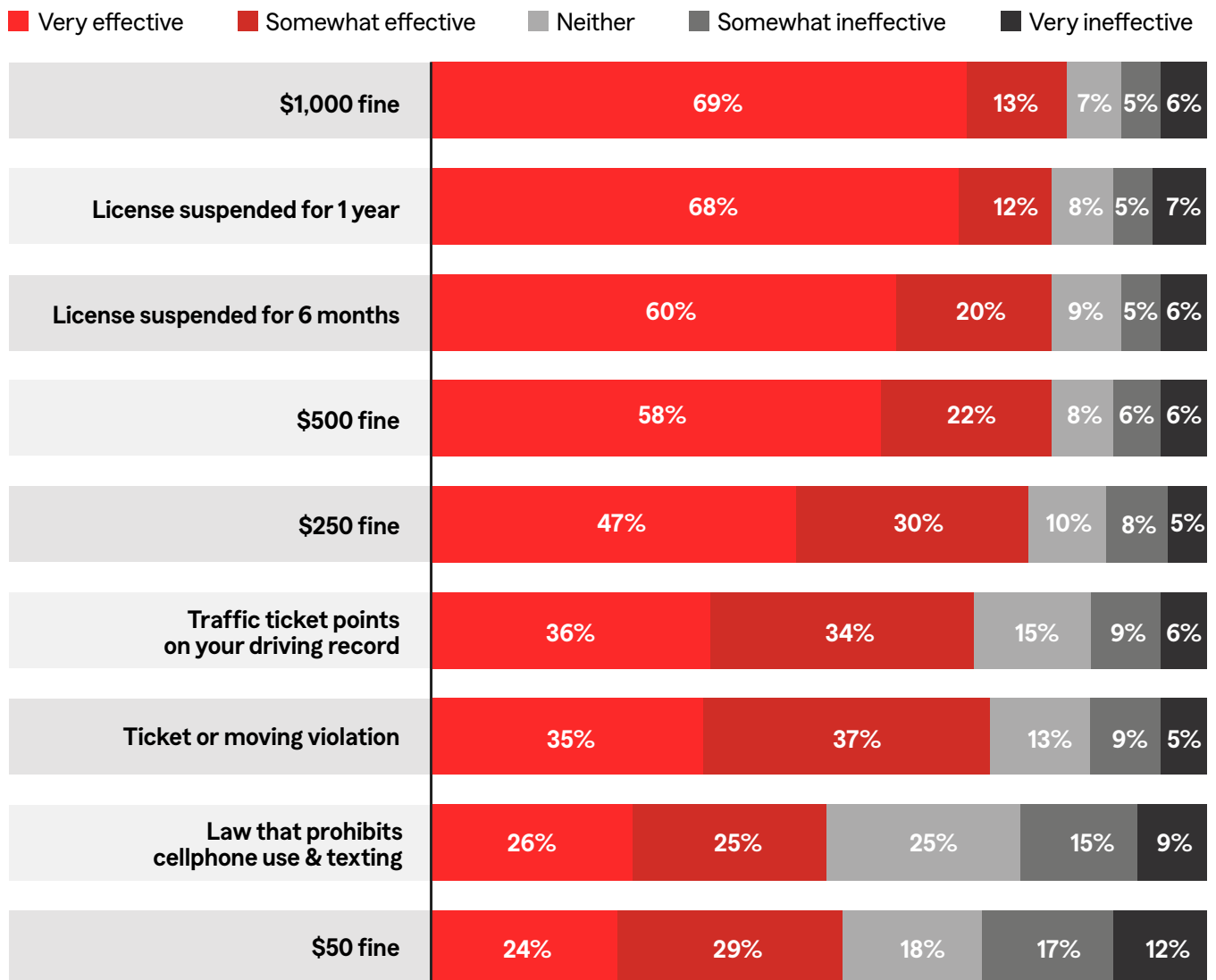
\*\*Only includes respondents from states in which texting while driving is banned for all drivers (All states except MO and MT). (n=956)

## Laws which prohibit phone use among teens while driving may be less impactful as a stand-alone measure than large monetary fines or having their license suspended.

At least four out of five teens believe fines of \$500 or more, or license suspensions of six months or longer would be effective in deterring them from using their phone while driving. In contrast, fewer teens (51 percent) feel laws, by themselves, are effective deterrents.

Younger teens (i.e., age 16-17) and those who have never been in an auto accident were more likely than others to say that each of the measures shown would be effective in discouraging them from using their phone while driving.

### “How effective is each of the following in discouraging you from using a cellphone while driving?”



Base: All teen respondents. (n=997)



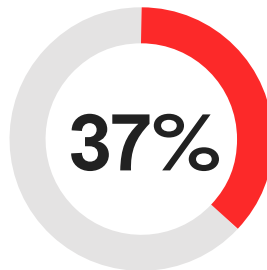
## Many teens reported driving a vehicle equipped with advanced safety features, and some of these teens may be too reliant on the systems.

Roughly two in five teens said their vehicle was equipped with Automatic Emergency Braking or Adaptive Cruise Control, while nearly one-quarter reportedly drove a vehicle with Lane Keeping Assist. Teens with newer vehicles (i.e., said their vehicle was less than five years old) were significantly more likely to say they had each of the safety features than teens with older vehicles. Roughly 40 percent of teens reported driving a vehicle that was less than five years old (see Appendix).

The advanced safety features may give teens a false sense of security as many who drive a vehicle with each of the features said they would feel comfortable taking their eyes off the road to focus on other tasks when the safety device was active. Yet driving situations can change quickly and may require swift actions by the driver – actions which may be delayed if teens are distracted and not focusing on the road at all times.

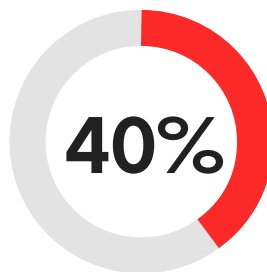
### Percent of teens who said the vehicle they drive most often is equipped with ...

Automatic Emergency Braking



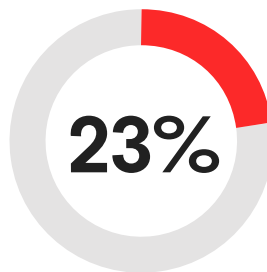
... and **16%** of these teens who at least occasionally activate the feature are comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road to focus on another task when Automatic Emergency Braking is active.

Adaptive Cruise Control



... and **24%** of these teens\* are comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road to focus on another task when Adaptive Cruise Control is active.

Lane Keeping Assist



... and **23%** of these teens who at least occasionally activate the feature are comfortable increasing the amount of time they take their eyes off the road to focus on another task when Lane Keeping Assist is active.

Base for safety feature ownership: All teens (n=997). See the Appendix for a definition of each safety feature.

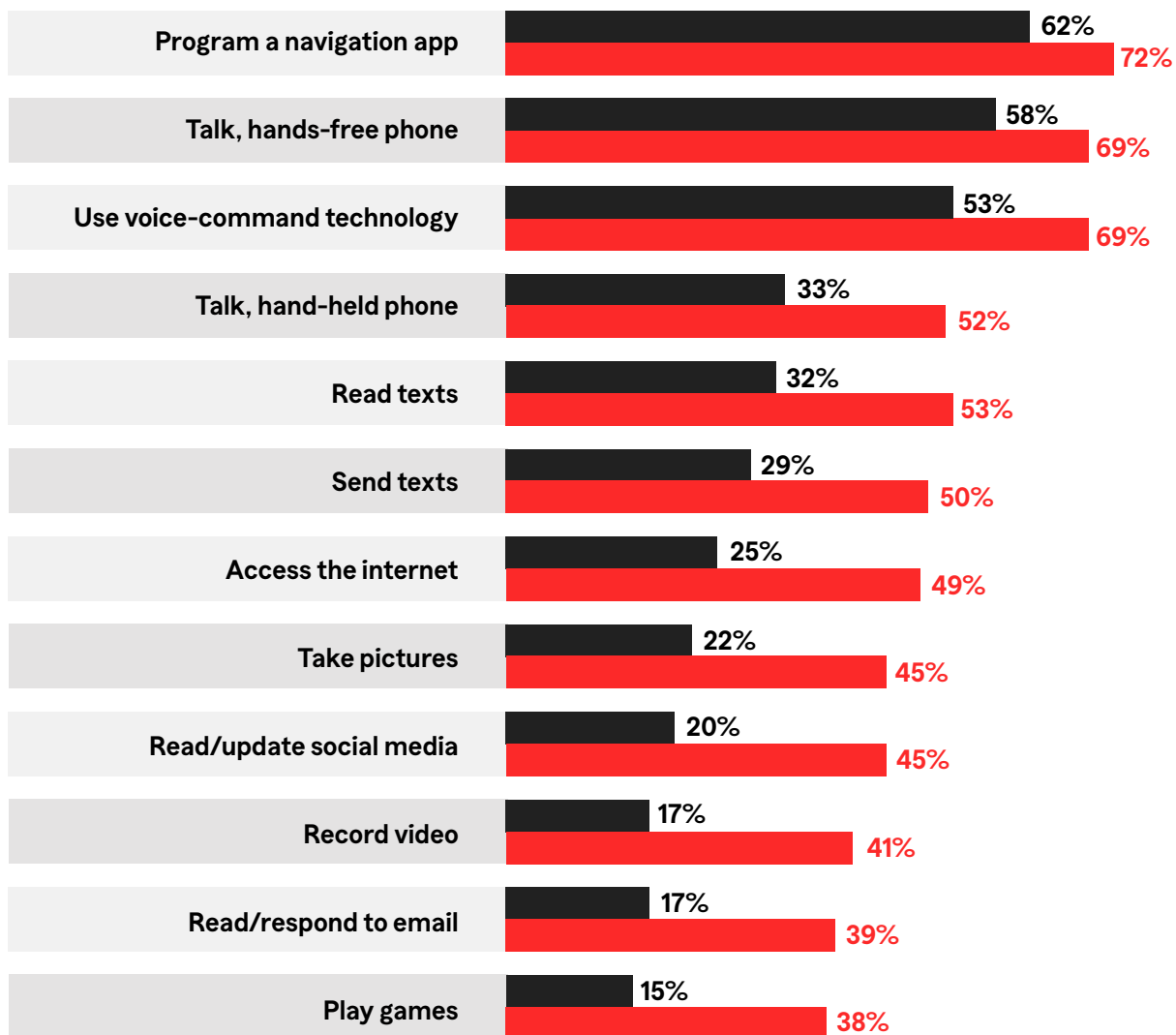
\*Teens with Adaptive Cruise Control were not asked how frequently the feature was active (or turned on) due to certain conditions being necessary (e.g., vehicle speed) in order for the feature to operate properly. Analysis for the other two features was restricted to those who said their vehicle was equipped with the safety feature and it was "Always," "Frequently," "Sometimes," or "Rarely" turned on (Automatic Emergency Braking n=325 out of 366 with the feature; Lane Keeping Assist n=206 out of 226 with the feature).

## Teens who drive vehicles with advanced safety features may need reminding of the importance of staying alert as these young drivers have a higher tendency of using their phones when behind the wheel.

Among all teens, 57 percent reported driving a vehicle with at least one of the advanced safety features (Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist). These teens were significantly more likely to say they engaged in each of the distracted smartphone behaviors while driving than those whose vehicle was not equipped with any of the advanced features.

### Activities teens say they participate in while driving by whether or not teens drive a vehicle with advanced safety features

■ Have no advanced safety features in vehicle ■ Have at least one advanced safety feature in vehicle



All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone). Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving. Advanced safety features include Automatic Emergency Braking, Adaptive Cruise Control, or Lane Keeping Assist. Base sizes: Teens Who Have No Advanced Safety Features (n=293); Teens Who Have At Least One Advanced Safety Feature (n=573); Teens who "didn't know" if their vehicle had any advanced safety features were excluded.

## Teens who reported having a license the longest were the most likely to engage in seven of the 12 distracted behaviors.

The newest drivers (i.e., those with a license less than six months) also exhibited relatively high participation rates for many of the behaviors. Among the 165 newest drivers, 49 were age 18-19. These older 'new' drivers reported much higher phone engagement rates than their younger counterparts.

### Smartphone activities teen drivers say they participate in while driving\*

	Drivers w/ license < 6 mos.**	Drivers w/ license 6-11 mos.**	Drivers w/ license 1-2 yrs.**	Drivers w/ license 3 or more yrs.**
	n = 165	n = 267	n = 409	n = 136
Program a navigation app	68%	64%	64%	81%
Talk on hands-free cellphone	62%	63%	63%	65%
Use voice-command technology for calls, texts, or navigating	59%	60%	63%	70%
Read text messages	46%	41%	44%	56%
Talk on hand-held cellphone	47%	40%	43%	54%
Send text messages	47%	37%	42%	51%
Access the internet	46%	37%	37%	46%
Take pictures	41%	36%	33%	35%
Read or update social media	40%	33%	32%	42%
Record video	36%	30%	31%	32%
Read or respond to email	36%	30%	28%	32%
Play a game	34%	28%	26%	30%
At least one of the above	88%	84%	88%	96%

All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone).

\*Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving. Other response options included "Rarely" and "Never."

\*\*Another response option was "Don't know/Can't remember." Respondents who chose this response were excluded from the driver's license analysis.

## Parents may be influencing their teen’s driving behavior.

Teens who said their parents use cellphones while driving were significantly more likely to engage in each phone activity (except using hands-free devices) than those who said their parents rarely or never use cellphones while driving. For instance, 56 percent of teens whose parents at least sometimes use their cellphone while driving say they read text messages when behind the wheel compared to 33 percent of teens whose parents rarely or never use a phone when driving.

**Percent of teens who participate in various activities\* by whether parent uses a phone while driving**

	Parent/guardian uses cellphone while driving**	Parent/guardian rarely/never uses cellphone while driving**
	n = 546	n = 451
Program a navigation app	74%	58%
Talk on hands-free cellphone	64%	62%
Use voice-command technology for calls, texts, or navigating	68%	56%
Read text messages	56%	33%
Talk on hand-held cellphone	52%	35%
Send text messages	52%	31%
Access the internet	49%	29%
Take pictures	43%	27%
Read or update social media	44%	25%
Record video	40%	23%
Read or respond to email	39%	22%
Play a game	36%	20%
At least one of the above	93%	82%

All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone).

\*Teen participation was defined as respondents selecting “Always,” “Frequently,” or “Sometimes” when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving

\*\*Teens were asked how often their parent/guardian uses a cellphone while driving. Those who responded “Always,” “Frequently,” or “Sometimes” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Uses Cellphone While Driving,” while teens who responded “Rarely” or “Never” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Rarely/Never Uses Cellphone While Driving.”

## Teens who said their parents set and enforce rules or monitor their driving were more likely to say they “never” participate in various activities while driving.

Teenagers whose parents set and enforce rules for their driving or whose parents monitor their driving were more likely to say they “never” talk on a hand-held phone, send or read text messages, or program a navigation app compared to those whose parents rarely or never set/enforce driving rules or monitor their driving. For example, 42 percent of teens whose parents at least sometimes set and enforce driving rules say they “never” talk on a hand-held phone when behind the wheel compared to 30 percent of teens whose parents rarely or never set/enforce driving rules.

**Percent of teens who say they “never” participate in the activity by parental actions**

	Parent/guardian sets & enforces rules for your driving*	Parent/guardian rarely/never sets & enforces rules for your driving*	Parent/guardian monitors your driving**	Parent/guardian rarely/never monitors your driving*
How often do you engage in the following while driving (% saying “never”):	n = 710	n = 287	n = 659	n = 338
<b>Program a navigation app</b>	19%	10%	18%	13%
<b>Read text messages</b>	38%	30%	38%	30%
<b>Talk on hand-held cellphone</b>	42%	30%	41%	33%
<b>Send text messages</b>	40%	33%	41%	33%

All activities shown were explicitly labeled as being done on a cellphone (e.g., accessing the internet on your cellphone).

Percentages represent the percent of teen respondents who selected “Never” when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving.

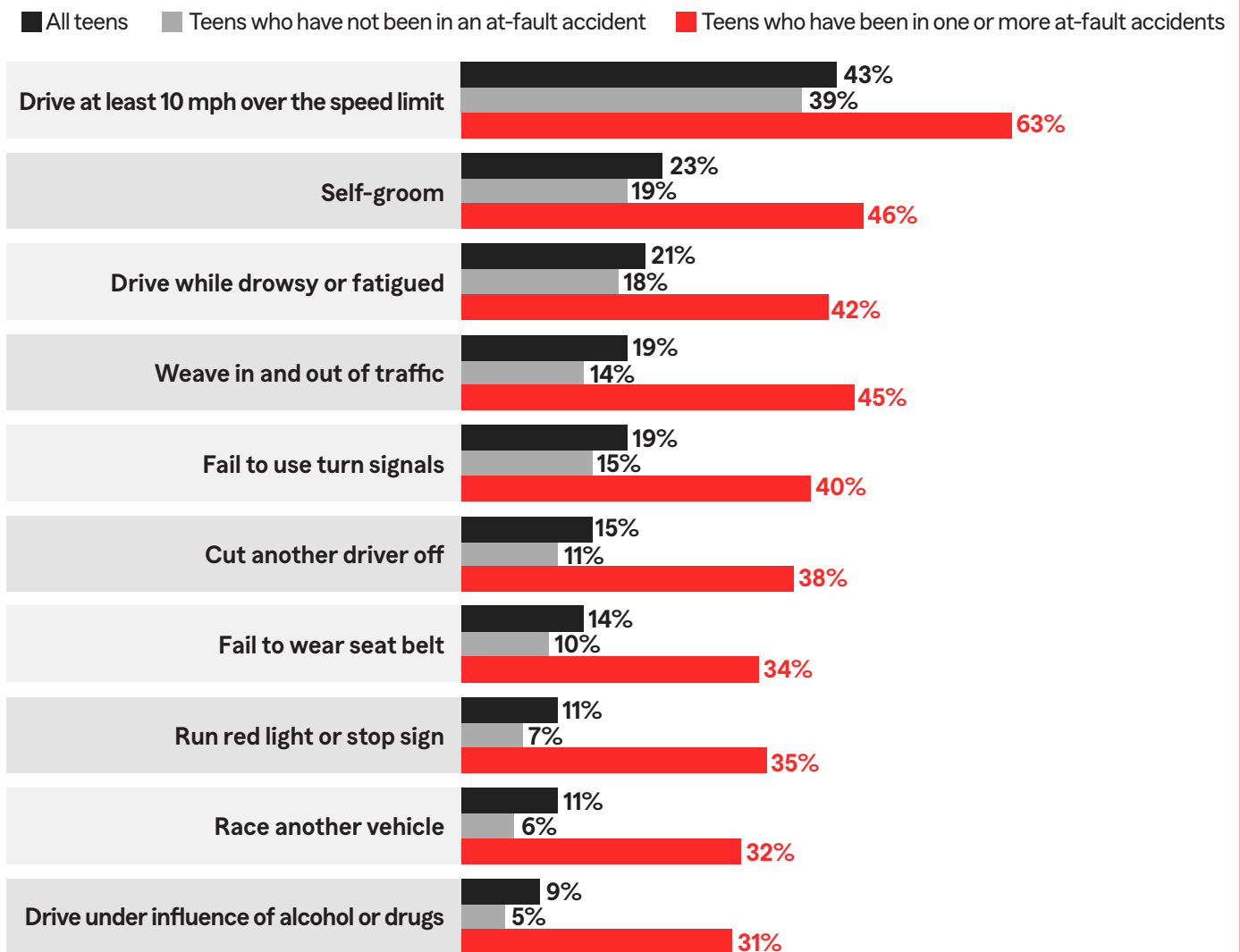
\*Teens were asked how often their parent/guardian “sets and enforces rules for your driving.” Those who responded “Always,” “Frequently,” or “Sometimes” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Sets & Enforces Rules For Your Driving,” while teens who responded “Rarely” or “Never” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Rarely/Never Sets & Enforces Rules For Your Driving.”

\*\*Teens were asked how often their parent/guardian “monitors your driving.” Those who responded “Always,” “Frequently,” or “Sometimes” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Monitors Your Driving,” while teens who responded “Rarely” or “Never” were classified as “Parent/Guardian Rarely/Never Monitors Your Driving.”

## Many teens also say they engage in other potentially dangerous behaviors while driving.

In addition to the distracted phone behaviors, teens were also asked about their participation in several other potentially dangerous driving behaviors including speeding, driving drowsy, failing to use turn signals, or driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs. As shown below, teens who had been in a prior auto accident were much more likely to exhibit these other dangerous driving behaviors than teens who had not been involved in an accident.

### Other risky behaviors teens do while driving by at-fault accident involvement



Participate was defined as respondents selecting "Always," "Frequently," or "Sometimes" when asked how often they engage in the activity while driving. Other response options included "Rarely" and "Never." Respondents who said they "Don't know/Can't remember" the number of auto accidents they had been involved in were excluded from the analysis shown above. Base sizes: All Teens (n=997); Teens Who Have Not Been in an Accident (n=826); Teens Who Have Been in 1+ Accidents (n=161)

## Respondent demographics

### Age & gender

Male 16 – 17 years old	25%
Female 16 – 17 years old	25%
Male 18 – 19 years old	25%
Female 18 – 19 years old	25%

### Number hours driven each week

5 hours or less	51%
More than 5 hours	49%

### Length of time with a driver's license

Less than 6 months	16%
6 – 11 months	27%
1 – 2 years	41%
3 or more years	14%
Don't know	2%

### Population of residence

Rural or small town (pop. under 75,000)	36%
Small metro area (pop. 75,000-500,000)	29%
Medium metro area (pop. 500,001-1 million)	21%
Large metro area (pop. over 1 million)	12%
Don't wish to answer	2%

### Age of vehicle driven most often

Less than 5 years old	41%
5 – 9 years old	27%
10 – 14 years old	15%
15 years old or older	12%
Don't know	4%

Note: Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.  
 Base: All teens (n=997)

## Methodology

In July 2020, the State Farm Enterprise Research Department used an outside panel vendor to conduct an online survey of U.S. consumers age 16-19. Survey responses were received from approximately 1,000 consumers who reported having a valid driver's license that allowed them to drive without adult supervision, owning a smartphone, and driving at least one hour per week. A number of changes were made to the survey research in 2020 such that results in this report should not be compared with the results in the 2016 "Teens, Smartphones, and Distracted Driving" report also produced by State Farm.

Three advanced safety features were explored in this research. Definitions of those features as presented to respondents are shown below:

**Automatic Emergency Braking** is an advanced vehicle technology that can automatically apply the brakes to avoid or lessen the severity of a crash.

**Adaptive Cruise Control** is an advanced vehicle technology that, in certain situations, can enable your vehicle to automatically adjust its speed to maintain a specific distance behind another vehicle.

**Lane Keeping Assist** is an advanced vehicle technology that, in certain situations, can enable your vehicle to automatically steer within your lane.