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## Why you're a bad driver, and I'm not

By: Karen Aho

The road has always been a dangerous place. But today's drivers report being more scared than ever, even as the number of fatal crashes in the United States drops to record lows.

The source of this heightened fear -- and anger -- is hardly a surprise: It's other drivers. Those other drivers, the selfish ones, the lane-blocking ones, the failing-to-signal ones. And now those drivers seem to be even more enamored with their phones and devices, at the expense of everyone else's safety and car insurance rates.

- In Texas, according to a Texas Transportation Institute survey, four-fifths of drivers say cell phone use has gotten worse in the past five years. By a wide margin, drivers even in this fiercely libertarian state support bans on cell phone use while driving.
- The AAA says that more than half of U.S. drivers surveyed in 2010 reported feeling less safe than they did five years earlier, a 17 percent jump from the year before. Nearly half blamed driver distraction. Most want stricter laws prohibiting cell phone use behind the wheel.

In this brave new world, it's very possible to be an aggressive, dangerous driver without ever exceeding the speed limit, getting into an accident, or racking up a checkered driving record.

Dialing triples the risk of a crash, according to AAA data, while simply talking increases the risk by 30 percent. The U.S. Department of Transportation attributed 16 percent of auto fatalities in 2008 and 2009 -- a total of 11,312 deaths -- to distracted driving.

But here's where driver surveys get interesting, and where they shed light on what's often overlooked in discussions about fear and rage on the road: That other driver is us.

### Do-as-I-say drivers

In poll after poll, the same drivers who complain about what others do -- in this case, chat or text -- admit to engaging in the same behavior.

- A Pemco Insurance survey of Washington drivers found that 9 out of 10 believed left-lane campers were a problem, but only 9 percent admitted to lane-blocking themselves.
- In the AAA survey, two-thirds of drivers said they used their cell phone behind the wheel in the past month. One-third admitted to doing so regularly.

- Nationwide insurance found last year that nearly half of drivers said they received texts and e-mails while driving, and more than 80 percent did so while stopped in traffic. Sixty percent of those with DVD players admitted to operating the units while driving.
- According to a study by Allstate Corp., seven in 10 drivers say they've braked or swerved hard, missed a traffic signal, or caused an accident because they were distracted.

"In poll after poll we see instances where people recognize that these are risky behaviors, yet very significant numbers, when you ask, 'Have you done X in the last month?' say, 'Yes,' " says Peter Kissinger, president and CEO of AAA's Foundation for Traffic Safety.

AAA calls it the "do as I say, not as I do" factor.

### **It's not you, it's me**

Do we think we simply drive-and-chat less often? When we see others doing it, do we honestly forget that we're guilty ourselves? Or do we just think we're more adept than others?

"Bingo" on all counts, say researchers.

"We call it the self-serving bias," says Leon James, a professor of psychology at the University of Hawaii and co-author of the book, *Road Rage and Aggressive Driving*.

This unconscious bias -- which distinguishes it from hypocrisy -- is hardly limited to the road. Most of us, particularly in individualistic countries like America, rate ourselves as above average in intelligence, work ethic, physical aptitude, character, even purity.

In one 1997 survey that gauged personal morality, 87 percent of those polled said they were likely to get into heaven themselves, but only 79 percent thought Mother Theresa would be granted entry. Only 65 percent gave Princess Diana the nod.

### **"Defensive driving" if I do it, "road rage" if you do it**

Such rosy subjectivity is great for warding off depression, but lousy at mitigating conflict. Nearly all of us walk around -- or drive around -- with a blind spot to our own missteps. Add the stress of traffic and it's a quick recipe for road rage and great way to lose your affordable insurance premiums.

"Driving is the most dangerous thing people do on a regular basis," James says. "When there's a near miss or mistakes are made, the stakes are much higher. So this tends to raise the level of emotion quite a bit."

When James surveys drivers, on average they admit to driving aggressively 30 percent of the time. But they say that others drive aggressively 80 percent of the time.

"Clearly there is a 50 percent gap in awareness among drivers about their own aggressiveness," he says. "We do not, without training ourselves, observe our own driving mistakes."

Those who want to rid the roads of those awful other drivers should start with themselves, says James.

"In my case, I realize I am not such a good driver because my wife, who is the passenger, started pointing my mistakes out to me," he says. One of his occasional oversights: forgetting to turn off the turn signal. Have you done that?