U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
NHTSA

Traffic Tech
TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER SERIES

DOT HS 813 895 November 2026

National Survey of Drowsy Driving Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors

Background

NHTSA has found that in 2023 at least 633 people were killed in traffic crashes that involved drowsy drivers (NCSA, 2025). Drowsy driving is not just falling asleep at the wheel. In cases of driving while excessively tired, driver alertness, attention, reaction time, judgment, and decision making are all compromised, which lead to a greater chance of crashing (Adanu et al., 2021; Rosekind, 2005). Many factors have been found to be related to drowsy driving, including lack of sleep; environmental factors; medications; medical conditions that can affect sleep quality; work schedule; and alcohol and drug use (McCartt et al., 1996; Powell & Chau, 2011; Stutts et al., 1999).

Methods

To further understand drowsy driving, the current study used a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States to investigate knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors involving drowsy driving. The survey contained questions regarding knowledge and attitudes toward drowsy-driving laws, the occurrence of drowsy driving, methods to combat drowsy driving, frequency of motor vehicle use, health conditions that might affect sleep, employment, and demographics. The research team developed an English version and Spanish version of the survey. Following cognitive testing and usability testing of the survey, the survey was administered in 2022 using an address-based sample approach to select a national probability sample of households. To address systematic non-response that could bias the results, households were stratified to oversample for African American, Hispanic, and younger potential respondents. The research team also oversampled residents from States with laws against drowsy driving or public education campaigns about drowsy driving. The samples were weighted to ensure that the final data set was representative of the target population.

Highlights of the Results

This Traffic Tech briefly summarizes the full report, which includes survey results from the national sample of respondents, which had an unweighted sample size of 3,765 respondents. The key outcome variables were whether someone had ever fallen asleep while driving and, if they had, how many times they had fallen asleep while driving in the past 30 days. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported having ever fallen asleep while driving, with an average of 0.23 times falling asleep while driving in the past 30 days.[1]

The largest percentage of respondents (27%) reported falling asleep during the hours of midnight to 5:59 a.m., followed by the 6 p.m. to midnight period (25%) and 6 a.m. to 11:59 a.m. period (12%). Among respondents who had fallen asleep while driving, the most common driving duration before their most recent time falling asleep was 30 to 59 minutes (17%), followed by less than 30 minutes (16%) and greater than 6 hours (15%). The survey also asked respondents how much sleep they had before their most recent time falling asleep while driving; the

[1] Respondents who reported never having fallen asleep while driving were included in the average as zeros.

most common response was 6 to 7 hours (24%), while the least common response was greater than 8 hours (7%). Respondents who had fallen asleep most frequently reported driving on multilane highways with a speed limit greater than 55 mph when they last fell asleep (62%). Finally, over 80 percent of respondents said they did not know if there was a law against drowsy driving in their State.

The research team used logistic and linear regression analyses to examine predictors of drowsy driving. Among constructs included in the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), respondents who felt more strongly that important people in their lives disapprove of drowsy driving (subjective norms) and respondents who believed they had control over whether they drove drowsy or not (perceived behavioral control) had lower reported intentions to engage in drowsy driving in the future.

The research team also found other factors were related to drowsy driving. For example, respondents nationally who said taxis and ride share services were available in their communities, drove as part of their jobs, got more sleep at night, or lived in States with laws against drowsy driving (Arkansas or New Jersey) had lower likelihood and/or frequency of drowsy driving. On the other hand, respondents nationally who reported more frequent night-driving, had more frequent difficulty sleeping, and had commutes longer than 30 minutes had increased likelihood or frequency of drowsy driving. The research team found some unexpected results, as well, including respondents who recalled hearing messages about the dangers of drowsy driving in the past year had increased likelihood and frequency of drowsy driving; one possibility is that drowsy-driving messaging campaigns are more salient and memorable to drivers who engage in the behavior.

Discussion

The research team investigated knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors regarding drowsy driving in a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults. About half of respondents reported having ever fallen asleep while driving. Both the likelihood of ever having fallen asleep and the frequency of drowsy driving in the past 30 days varied with driving, work, and sleep characteristics, as well as attitudes and beliefs about drowsy driving. Although most respondents did not know whether their State had a law against drowsy driving, those living in the two States with drowsy-driving laws, Arkansas and New Jersey, had reduced likelihood and frequency of drowsy driving. Limitations of the study included a low response rate, potential non-response bias, and social desirability and recall biases affecting survey responses; these limitations affect the generalizability of the findings. Together, the findings from this survey provide national information about knowledge and attitudes regarding drowsy-driving behavior throughout the United States.

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For more details, please see the full report:

Dorazio, K., Engelken, C., Stoloff, J., Bellemore, F., Dance, C., Best, J., Watson, C. E., & Blenner, J. A. (2026, November). *National survey of drowsy driving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors* (Report No. DOT HS 813 887). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. https://doi.org/10.21949/0s6w-na83

Suggested APA format citation for this report:

Blenner, J. A., & Watson, C. E. (2026, November). *National survey of drowsy driving knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors* (Traffic Safety Facts Traffic Tech. Report No. DOT HS 813 895). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. https://doi.org/10.21949/k6hx-sm72

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