



# **Bolstering Traffic Safety Efforts to Address Aggressive Driving**

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*Project: Understanding  
Aggressive Driving and Ways  
to Reduce It – Phase 1*

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# ***Bolstering Traffic Safety Efforts to Address Aggressive Driving***

Montana Department of Transportation  
in cooperation with the U.S. Department of  
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# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Growing Prosocial Driving .....	<b>9</b>
Using Strategies that Support Cognitive Reappraisal and Adaptive Responses .....	<b>12</b>
Challenging Misperceptions .....	<b>16</b>
Increasing Perceived Disapproval Through Bystander Engagement .....	<b>19</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>23</b>

# Introduction

**This document provides guidance for traffic safety practitioners about ways to bolster their current traffic safety efforts to address aggressive driving.**

Aggressive driving is a complex behavior that requires multiple strategies and involves many diverse stakeholder groups to work together. Bolstering current traffic safety efforts to address aggressive driving can foster collaboration and promote engagement on this important issue.

Aggressive driving is defined as “any unsafe driving behavior that is performed deliberately, with ill intention or disregard for safety, and impacts others.”<sup>1</sup>

There are many reasons to be concerned about aggressive driving. Aggressive driving is a leading contributing cause in traffic crashes, with evidence suggesting aggressive driving is a cause in approximately 56% of fatal crashes in the United States (U.S.).<sup>2</sup> Further, aggressive driving is considered a common behavior among drivers. In a recent self-reported aggressive driving behavior survey, approximately 80% of drivers reported expressing anger, aggression, or road rage while driving at least once in the past 30 days.<sup>3</sup>

## What is aggressive driving?

Aggressive driving includes “ANY unsafe driving behavior that is performed deliberately, with ill intention or disregard for safety, and impacts others.”<sup>1</sup>

Aggressive driving behaviors include actions like:

- cutting off another vehicle and braking hard,
- tailgating a slower vehicle,
- ignoring the right-of-way to “beat” another vehicle,
- responding to other drivers with rude gestures or excessive honking.

## This document includes:



information about what was learned from a survey on aggressive driving among adults in the U.S.;



guiding questions to identify opportunities to enhance existing traffic safety efforts to reduce aggressive driving; and



ideas and specific actions that could be integrated into existing traffic safety efforts.

### Is aggressive driving the same as road rage?

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Aggressive driving and road rage are different. Road rage can be defined as “extreme acts of violence punishable as a criminal offense, which includes physical assault.”<sup>4</sup> Road rage is often more extreme than aggressive driving.<sup>5</sup>

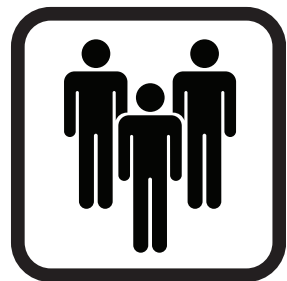
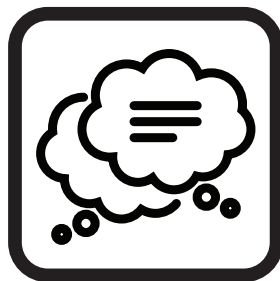
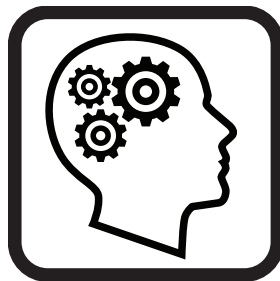
### Is speeding considered aggressive driving?

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It depends. Aggressive driving must be situated within the context of others. Thus, behavior is not considered aggressive if it does not occur in the context of another person (e.g., another driver, a pedestrian, etc.).

Speeding, for example, may be considered aggressive driving behavior when it impacts other road users (e.g., the other driver must slow down or move over). However, speeding on a highway or isolated road with no other road users would not constitute aggressive driving behavior and instead would be considered risky or careless.<sup>1</sup>

# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving



# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving

**Bolstering current traffic safety efforts with strategies that address aggressive driving can occur in many ways, including:**



growing prosocial driving



using strategies that support cognitive reappraisal and adaptive responses



challenging misperceptions



increasing perceived disapproval through bystander engagement

This document uses information learned from a survey about aggressive driving.



## About the Survey

Throughout this document, we share results from a survey of adult U.S. drivers conducted in the summer of 2023. The survey was completed by 841 drivers; demographics of the sample approximated the U.S. population in age, gender, race, ethnicity, and state of residence. More detailed information about the survey methodology and results can be found in the *Understanding Aggressive Driving and Ways to Reduce It – Final Report*.<sup>1</sup>



# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving

## Growing Prosocial Driving



Prosocial driving is “a **pattern of safe driving behaviors** that potentially protect the well-being of passengers, other drivers, and pedestrians, and that promotes effective cooperation with others in the driving environment.”<sup>6</sup>

**Prosocial driving includes a wide range of behaviors<sup>6</sup> like:**

Using mirrors and checking blind spots when changing lanes

Using turn signals (blinkers) to notify other drivers of an intention to turn

Braking slowly enough to alert drivers behind you

Decreasing speed to accommodate poor road conditions

Yielding when the right of way belongs to other drivers

Maintaining a safe distance when following other vehicles

Paying attention to traffic and surroundings while driving

Driving with extra care around pedestrians



**Promoting prosocial driving may be a potential avenue to reduce aggressive driving as engaging in prosocial driving makes aggressive driving less likely.<sup>1</sup>**



### Survey Data

The majority of participants (91.1%) reported engaging in prosocial driving behaviors often while driving.

More frequent engagement in prosocial driving behaviors was associated with less frequent aggressive driving behaviors.

The most frequent prosocial behaviors endorsed by participants included using mirrors and checking blind spots when changing lanes, using turn signals, paying attention to traffic and surroundings, and driving with extra care around pedestrians.

## Guiding Questions



What current strategies/ countermeasures/campaigns promote prosocial driving behaviors?



How can your current strategies be bolstered to increase prosocial driving?



In what ways can prosocial driving behaviors be promoted?



## Ideas

### **Infuse communication strategies and traffic safety campaigns with the promotion of prosocial driving behaviors that align with the strategy or campaign being implemented.**

For example, if the current traffic safety campaign focuses on occupant protection, consider ways to promote prosocial driving behaviors that align with occupant protection.

- Partner with public health car seat inspection events and promote prosocial driving behaviors among parents. Focus on connecting a child's safety to engaging in prosocial behaviors like paying extra attention while driving around pedestrians and bicyclists or slowing down when road conditions are less than ideal.
- Partner with local emergency medical service events that focus on occupant protection and consider ways to promote prosocial behaviors that align with the wellbeing of everyone. For example, asking others to wear a seat belt in the vehicle, not using a cellphone while driving, or maintaining a safe distance between vehicles.

### **Provide education about prosocial driving behaviors in driver education programs, driver training programs, and workplace driving safety meetings.**

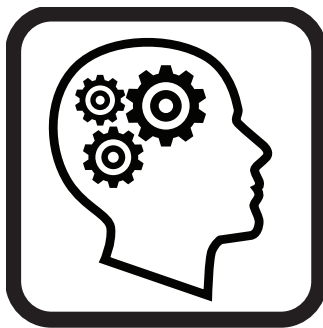
### **Connect prosocial driving to shared values and beliefs people have about safety on roadways and caring about others.**

Communication messages could be used in a variety of media (social media, campaigns, etc.). Some examples:

- Most people engage in prosocial driving behaviors often while driving.
- Most people engage in prosocial behaviors like using mirrors and checking blind spots when changing lanes, using turn signals, paying attention to traffic and surroundings, and driving with extra care around pedestrians.
- Most drivers in our community look out for one another on the roads.
- Other fellow drivers sometimes make mistakes, but drivers around here are usually courteous and careful.

# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving

## Using Strategies that Support Cognitive Reappraisal and Adaptive Responses



**How a driver thinks about a situation they encounter while driving** can influence their response and the ultimate outcome. A driver's cognitive appraisal of a situation is likely to influence their behavior.<sup>7,8</sup>

Thinking about a situation encountered while driving in a negative way can lead to feelings of anger or frustration. For example, negative thoughts that might increase anger include 'He did that on purpose,' 'He can't do that to me. I'll do that to him and see how he likes it,' 'There's always a billion people on the road.'<sup>9</sup> In contrast, thinking about a situation in a neutral or positive way may lead to less anger or frustration about the situation. Neutral or positive thoughts might include 'He didn't mean to do that,' 'They must not have seen me waiting to merge into traffic,' 'I don't blame them; it is hard to navigate this busy traffic.'

Similarly, when drivers perceive that other drivers' behaviors are unintentional mistakes or errors, they may respond differently and with less aggression than if they think other drivers' behaviors are deliberate or malicious.<sup>8</sup> Perceptions of other drivers' intentions may influence a driver's tendencies to engage in aggressive behaviors when driving.<sup>10,11</sup>

Cognitive reappraisal is about changing the way we think about a driving situation to change our response to the situation.

If people can reconceptualize the behavior of other drivers as neutral or an innocent mistake rather than malicious or intentionally hostile, **they may be less likely to engage in aggressive driving actions.**<sup>1</sup>

### Survey Data



Participants reported engaging in aggressive driving more frequently if they experienced others driving aggressively more often.

Similarly, participants who perceived that others frequently drive aggressively engaged in aggressive driving more often themselves.

It is normal for drivers to sometimes feel angry. When feeling angry, drivers can choose an aggressive response or an adaptive response. Examples of aggressive responses include making negative comments about the other driver aloud, swearing at the other driver aloud, or driving faster.

Adaptive responses are constructive ways people respond to feelings of anger that focus on safe driving and coping. These responses include problem-solving, changing perspective, reframing the situation, acceptance, and using coping strategies that reduce anger.<sup>12</sup>

### Examples of adaptive responses include:

Paying even closer attention to being a safe driver

Thinking of positive solutions to deal with the situation

Telling yourself to ignore it

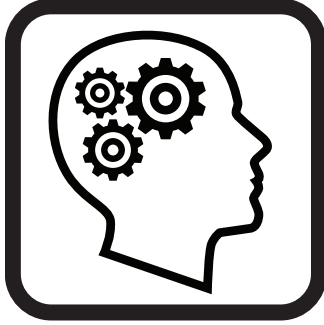
Taking deep breaths to calm down

Accepting there are frustrating situations

Telling yourself it's not worth getting mad at

Telling yourself it's not worth getting involved

Thinking things through before responding



Promoting adaptive responses to anger while driving **could reduce aggressive driving.**<sup>1</sup>



## Survey Data

Most participants often used adaptive responses to feeling angry while driving.

Greater use of adaptive responses, both in how often and in the number of different adaptive responses reported, was associated with less aggressive driving.

Most participants rarely responded aggressively to feeling angry while driving.

The most frequent positive/adaptive responses used by participants when angry included: telling yourself it's not worth getting involved, accepting there are frustrating situations, telling yourself it's not worth getting mad at.

## Guiding Questions



What activities can grow drivers' skills to engage in cognitive reappraisal and adaptive responses when feeling angry?



How do current traffic safety efforts promote the use of cognitive reappraisal skills and adaptive responses?



What strategies are currently being implemented to increase traffic safety and how could those strategies be augmented to include strategies to grow drivers' skills to use cognitive reappraisal and adaptive responses?



Who in the community has shared interest in growing reappraisal and adaptive skills?



## Ideas

### **Understand existing strategies and consider ways to integrate cognitive reappraisal and adaptive response skill building into those strategies.**

- For example, a common resource document for traffic safety practitioners is *Countermeasures that Work: A Highway Safety Countermeasure Guide for State Highway Safety Offices Tenth Edition, 2020*.<sup>13</sup> This resource is used to assist in identifying and selecting effective traffic safety strategies for various risky behaviors. The risky behavior of aggressive driving is discussed alongside strategies to reduce speed. Deterrence through traffic law enforcement is a strategy highlighted in this resource to reduce aggressive driving behaviors. Thus, traffic safety practitioners may want to consider ways to grow cognitive reappraisal and adaptive responses skills alongside enforcement efforts.

### **Provide education in driver education programs, driver training programs, and workplace driving safety meetings.**

- Teach how cognitive reappraisal works and why it is important. Give examples of what it looks like in driving situations.
- Teach what adaptive response skills are and help participants identify a variety of adaptive responses they could use.

### **Show examples of cognitive reappraisal skills and adaptive responses in media communications.**

- For example, if a current traffic safety campaign focuses on distracted driving, consider ways to show the use of cognitive reappraisal skills to lessen the frustration of encountering someone who is on their phone and driving.
- Provide examples of how to challenge negative thoughts and reframe them in a more neutral way. For example, promote that other drivers might make mistakes but that most drivers are not intentionally rude to other drivers or driving aggressively.

### **Partner with local events to grow cognitive reappraisal skills and adaptive response skills.**

- Partner with a local traffic safety event and provide education about how cognitive reappraisal works, why it is important, and give examples of situations where cognitive reappraisal could lead to a different emotional reaction.

# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving

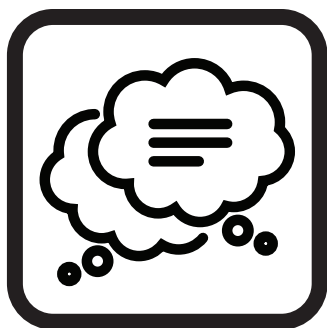
## Challenging Misperceptions



**Beliefs influence behavior,** and misperceptions may make it more likely people will engage in behaviors that are risky.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, **to change behavior, we need to focus on changing beliefs.** Correcting misperceptions regarding the actual frequency of aggressive driving and presenting factual norms that most people do not regularly drive aggressively may reduce aggressive driving.





Challenging misperceptions could present an important opportunity to **reduce aggressive driving**.<sup>1</sup>



### Survey Data

Drivers believe other people in their community drive aggressively more frequently than the drivers themselves report. Drivers also perceive that other drivers in their state and across the country drive aggressively even more often than other drivers in their community.

Those that believe others drive aggressively more frequently also drive aggressively more often themselves.

## Guiding Questions



What are opportunities to correct misperceptions about aggressive driving?



Who are stakeholders that could support efforts to challenge misperceptions about aggressive driving?



What information may directly or indirectly contribute to misperceptions about aggressive driving?



## Ideas

**Challenge misperceptions by presenting accurate norms through messaging. Use current and accurate data to support these claims.**

Messages could include:

- Most drivers in our community do not often drive aggressively.
- Most adults engage in prosocial driving behaviors often while driving.
- It might seem like everyone around here drives aggressively, but most drivers in our community are respectful and considerate of other drivers.

**Engage with the public in a variety of ways to promote accurate data about aggressive driving.**

- Attend local events (health fairs, community hall meetings, community events, etc.) to promote conversation and accurate data about aggressive driving. These community engagement events are opportunities to engage on the topic of aggressive driving and to encourage conversation.

**Find trusted sources to deliver information.**

- Carefully consider the source being used to deliver information and select sources the audience for the messages finds trustworthy.
- Consider:
  - Who can add credibility?
  - Who are the trusted sources for the intended audience?

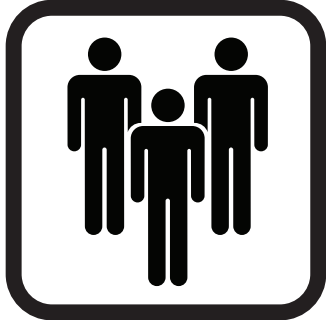
# Bolstering Existing Traffic Safety Efforts to Reduce Aggressive Driving

## Increasing Perceived Disapproval Through Bystander Engagement



**Bystanders, especially partners, family, and close friends,** can be influential in encouraging others to not drive aggressively.

Whether riding along in the vehicle or not, we can make it clear to people who are important to us that we do not support them driving aggressively and instead support prosocial driving behavior.



Perceived disapproval is a unique opportunity for **intervention to reduce aggressive driving.**<sup>1</sup>



### Survey Data

Greater perceived disapproval was associated with less frequent engagement in aggressive driving behaviors.

Participants believed their partner, significant other, or closest friend would disapprove the most of them engaging in aggressive driving actions.

## Guiding Questions



What are opportunities to grow perceptions of disapproval about aggressive driving?



In what ways can we bolster bystander engagement skills to speak up about aggressive driving?



How can bystanders be directly engaged in promoting traffic safety, including reducing aggressive driving?



## Ideas

**Promote bystander engagement as an overarching strategy to address a variety of risky driving behaviors (i.e., distraction, not wearing a seat belt, driving under the influence of substances, aggressive driving, etc.).**

- Include specific examples of what bystander engagement could look like in situations for each risky driving behavior.

**Show examples of bystander engagement in media communications.**

- Illustrate bystanders both in and out of the vehicle asking their loved ones to not drive aggressively.
- Provide language that passengers of all ages can use, such as asking drivers to not drive aggressively or to offer cognitive reappraisals during an encounter with another driver.

**Incorporate the role of bystanders in drivers' education and prevention strategies for young people.**

**Empower passengers to play an active role in traffic safety and increase awareness among drivers and passengers alike that traffic safety and reducing aggressive driving is a shared responsibility.**

# Conclusion



**Bolstering current traffic safety efforts to address aggressive driving can help traffic safety practitioners maximize resources and foster engagement.**

Growing prosocial driving, using strategies that support cognitive reappraisal and adaptive responses, challenging misperceptions, and increasing perceived disapproval through bystander engagement can be incorporated into existing efforts to address aggressive driving.

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