

Direct Line & Brake Reports on Safe Driving

Driver behaviour



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Direct Line[®]

Brake asked 2,019 drivers questions about their driving behaviour. The survey was carried out online in March 2020 by independent market research company, SurveyGoo. In March 2021, 2,013 drivers were asked a follow-up question to see whether attitudes changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over the past year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of us have spent less time on the roads than we would have before, but the latter part of 2021 is likely to look very different. As the Government restrictions begin to lift and lockdowns ease, life will begin to return to what we recognise as 'normal' – and this feels like a good opportunity to reflect on how we interact in this new world.

It goes without saying that reduced vehicle usage during the pandemic has had a positive environmental impact, and the way we make our journeys has also changed – although it's probably still too early to tell whether this is a short- or long-term change. Those living in London, one of them me, have certainly witnessed a significant increase in the number of cyclists on our roads.

A £250 million Government investment in pop-up and permanent cycle lanes will support a continued growth in cycling, making it more important than ever to consider the safety of all road users, including cyclists and pedestrians, as well as drivers.

Statistics given in this report show that, although people may know that they should leave a distance of at least 1.5m when overtaking a cyclist, many don't do so. Cyclists don't have the same protection as people inside vehicles and are much more vulnerable in the event of a collision. Leaving more space between yourself and a cyclist is one simple change that all drivers can make, to help make roads safer for people who choose to ride.

Developments in car technology are now heavily relied upon, both for safety and to support driving – from the now indispensable parking sensors to potentially life-saving emergency braking. Despite these developments, most collisions are caused by human error, and driver behaviour and mood continue to have a big impact on safety for all road users. The report highlights that younger drivers in particular are more likely to take risks or alter their driving style when either stressed or angry, but drivers of all ages are affected by changes in mood. I'm sure most of us can think of an occasion where we've started a journey in a less than positive frame of mind, and, if we're honest with ourselves, where we weren't fully concentrating.

An additional poll of drivers taken in 2021 (a year after the survey questions outlined in this report were first asked) show just how fundamental this is, with a 6% increase in drivers stating they do feel stressed or angry when driving, and an additional 3% of drivers telling us they feel this way on every journey they make. This is a timely reminder to consider how our mood and the actions we take as drivers are important – and can affect the safety of all road users.



We urge you to consider the advice given in this report – to take a moment to be calm before setting off on a journey and develop your own mechanisms for coping with stress during a journey – to reduce the risk both to yourself and everyone you share the road with. It's not enough to just be awake, we need to "drive consciously", and really think about how our behaviour affects the safety of other road users.



Direct Line[®]

Lorraine Price
Head of Direct Line Motor Insurance

Children growing up in the 1970s (like me) remember, with some affection, Dave Prowse's 'Green Cross Code Man', who appeared in a number of TV adverts which aimed to equip pedestrians, especially children, with information on how to cross the roads safely.

Looking back on these campaigns now, it is easy to pick fault. While the classic slogan "stop, look, listen" is clearly good advice, the subtext of "pedestrians – look out for yourselves!" hardly sits well with a modern 'safe-system' approach to road safety.

The findings in this report from Brake, however, tell us that "look out for yourselves!" is still a reality for vulnerable road users, like pedestrians and cyclists, and highlight how far we still have to go in protecting them.

Nearly one in five drivers, when asked how much room they leave when passing cyclists, say one metre or less (the recommended minimum being 1.5m). Nearly one in five drivers say that most or all of the time, they drive through a crossing when the traffic lights are on amber (even though amber means stop).

There are some clues in the findings as to how we can go about challenging these behaviours. Young people, as is often the case in road safety research (and in wider health research) tend to report risky behaviours more than older people. Drivers in London report greater rates of amber-light running – presumably because they adapt to local driving conditions and pressures. Armed with such findings, campaigns can be targeted in different ways for the different segments based on demographics like age, and the local environment in which they do their driving.

But what about the drivers themselves? They were also asked whether they ever feel stressed or angry when driving; around a fifth said they do on more than half of their journeys, with younger drivers and those living in London again being over-represented. And drivers know it changes their behaviour – with many saying that when stressed they speed up, drive closer to the vehicle in front, and accelerate and brake more harshly.

Our 'safe-system' approach clearly has much to consider here too. Continued efforts are needed to stop 'stress' and 'hurry' being accepted as normal when driving; engagement with employers, policy-makers and others needs to move us towards an expectation that when doing the single riskiest thing most of us do in our daily lives (certainly when it comes to the risk we present to cyclists and pedestrians around us) a calm and respectful state of mind is what is needed.

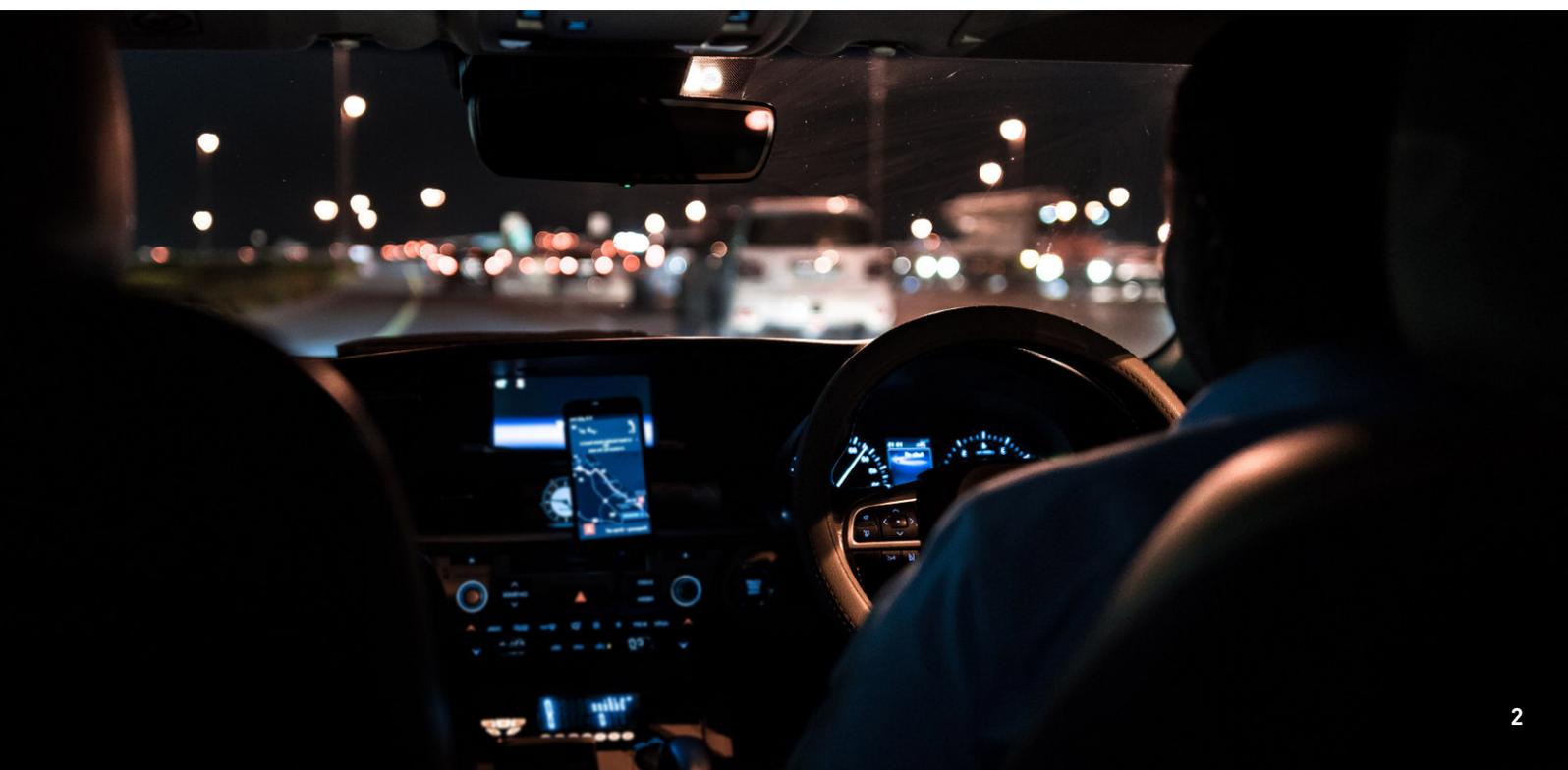
The advice given at the end of this report for drivers is spot on in this regard. None of it involves advanced training or technology. Much of it is sensible advice related to lifestyle, and the choices made by drivers long before they get behind the wheel.

Plan. Breathe. Eat well. Good advice to move away from a subtext of "pedestrians – look out for yourselves" to one of "everyone – look after yourselves, and others".



TRL

Dr Shaun Helman
Chief Scientist for Behaviour,
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It is a sad truth that many, otherwise avoidable, road crashes are caused by dangerous driver behaviours. From harsh braking and acceleration to road rage and risky overtaking, these behaviours contribute to the thousands of fatal and serious collisions that occur on Britain's roads each year. What's more, everyone is at risk of succumbing to these behaviours, as all drivers are exposed to stressful situations from time to time.

It is therefore vital that, until we have a fully developed 'safe system' for our roads – with the whole road environment designed to prevent road crashes from occurring, and to minimise the harm caused when they do – we do everything we can to stop the preventable tragedies that are caused by unnecessary risk-taking.

Our report highlights that, overall, the majority of drivers are responsible when it comes to whether or not they undertake these risky behaviours (or, at least, they self-report as such). However, the majority is not all and so there is progress still to be made, in particular to protect vulnerable road users who are exposed to danger from those who do pass too close to cyclists, or who drive through a traffic light, when it's on amber.

This report also shines a light on other areas of concern, where road safety improvement is required. For example, the high proportion of younger drivers who said they always drive through an amber light, no matter the traffic conditions. Failing to stop at traffic lights when indicated could potentially lead to a serious crash, particularly if

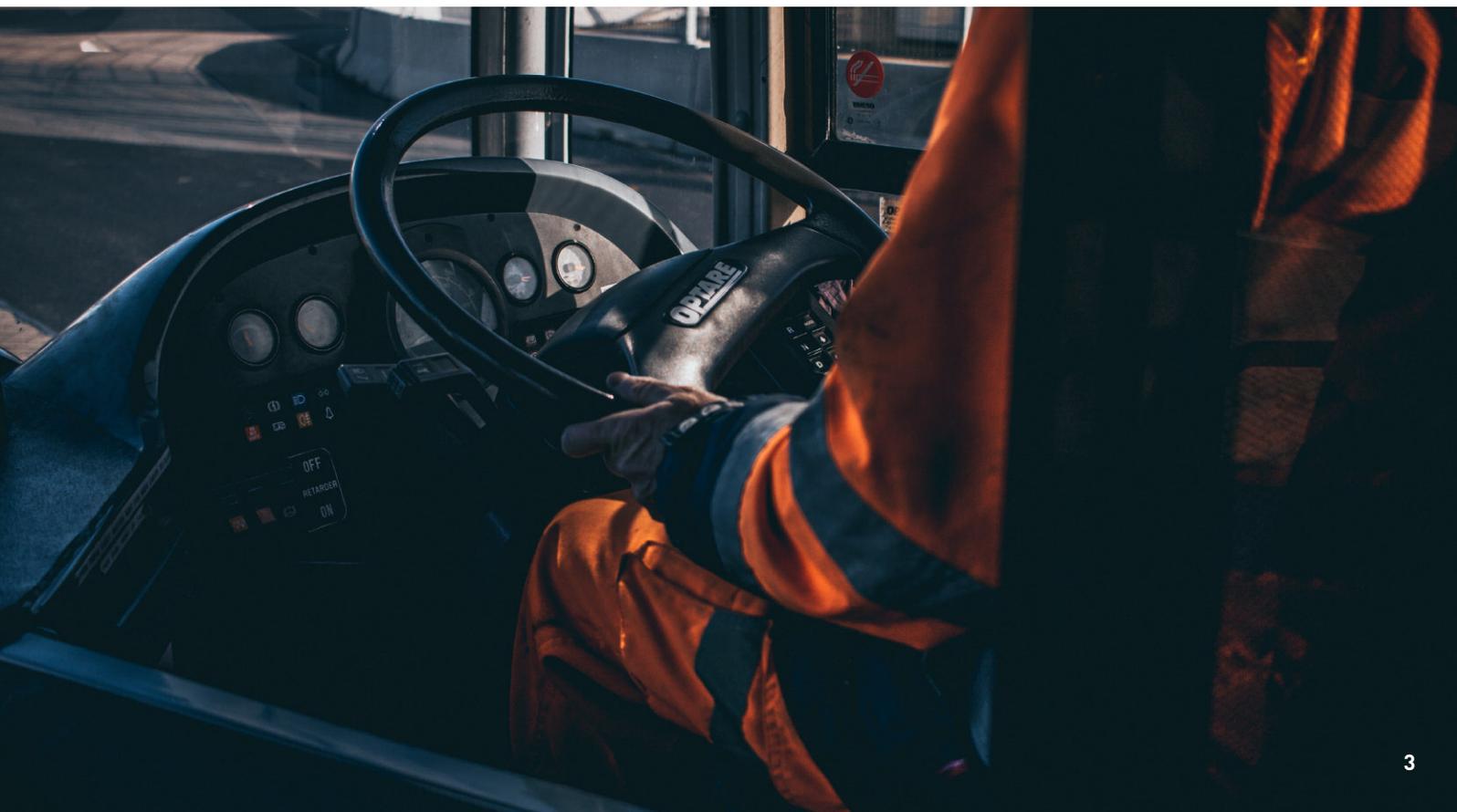
drivers are racing to get through before the lights change and so may be paying less attention to the road. Such findings suggest that further education about behaviour around driving through traffic lights could be effectively targeted at younger road users.

The feedback from drivers also shows that stress and anger are problems that most people will encounter at some point on the roads. This is a particularly worrying finding, as more than half of drivers also told us that, somewhat unsurprisingly, their behaviour changes when they feel stressed or angry behind the wheel, which can lead to them undertaking more risky driving behaviours – with harsh braking, speeding and a lack of focus particularly common. These negative emotions can also limit drivers' ability to spot and respond to hazards, putting them further in danger of experiencing a crash.

This report seeks to highlight that without proper care, everyone is at risk from dangerous driving behaviours. Hopefully, its findings will lead to greater awareness of the risks we all face and encourage action to help drivers address them.



Josh Harris
Director of campaigns



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OVERTAKING

Rule 163 of the Highway Code states that you should **only overtake** when it is safe and legal to do so. You should:

- not get too close to the vehicle you intend to overtake
- use your mirrors, signal when it is safe to do so, take a quick sideways glance if necessary into the blind spot area and then start to move out
- not assume that you can simply follow a vehicle ahead which is overtaking; there may only be enough room for one vehicle
- move quickly past the vehicle you are overtaking, once you have started to overtake. Allow plenty of room. Move back to the left as soon as you can but do not cut in
- take extra care at night and in poor visibility when it is harder to judge speed and distance
- give way to oncoming vehicles before passing parked vehicles or other obstructions on your side of the road
- only overtake on the left if the vehicle in front is signalling to turn right, and there is room to do so
- stay in your lane if traffic is moving slowly in queues. If the queue on your right is moving more slowly than you are, you may pass on the left
- give motorcyclists, cyclists and horse riders at least as much room as you would when overtaking a car.¹

CYCLING SAFETY

Cyclists are among the most vulnerable people on our roads. They do not have the same protection that car occupants do, so in the event of a crash they are exposed to the full impact, raising the risk of death or serious injury. In 2019, there were a total of 100 cyclist deaths, 3,695 serious injuries and 13,089 other injuries in Britain.² The fatality rate for cyclists is 18 times that for car occupants – 29 cyclists were killed for every billion miles travelled in 2019, compared with 1.6 car occupants. Additionally, nearly 5,000 cyclists are injured every billion miles travelled – a rate 25 times that of car occupants. It is important to note, however, that the time spent on the roads for cyclists to travel such distances will be magnitudes higher than that for car occupants, due to the speed the respective modes travel at.³

This level of risk for people cycling is highlighted by the fact that two-thirds of adults in England feel it is too dangerous for them to cycle on the roads.⁴



In this report, we explore aspects of driving behaviour that may impact on the safety, both perceived and actual, of vulnerable road users. We also sought to understand how drivers themselves perceive that a negative mindset affects their driving behaviour.

SECTION 1 – DRIVING BEHAVIOUR AND VULNERABLE ROAD USERS

In this section we looked at driving behaviour and vulnerable road users.

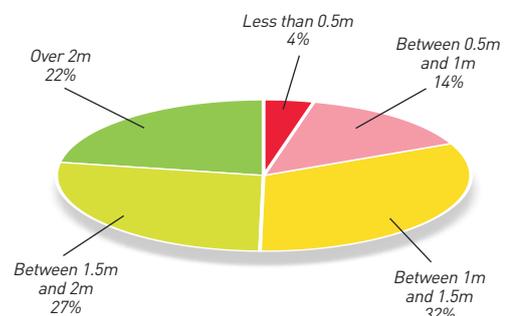
In question 1, drivers were asked how much room they leave between their car and a cyclist when overtaking on a road with a speed limit of 30mph or less.

We asked drivers how much room they leave cyclists when overtaking: less than 0.5m, between 0.5m and 1m; between 1m and 1.5m; between 1.5m and 2m; or over 2m. The general guidance is to leave as much space as you would give to any other vehicle (commonly interpreted as 1.5 metres).

The most common response from drivers was that they leave between 1m and 1.5m, with almost a third (32%) selecting this option. Slightly fewer (27%) said they leave between 1.5m and 2m, and 22% said they leave over 2m. Just 14% claimed they leave between 0.5m and 1m, and 4% leave less than half a metre.

In general, younger drivers leave cyclists the least room overtaking. More than one in six (18%) 18–24 year olds said they leave less than 0.5m, and a fifth (21%) leave between 0.5m and 1m. In comparison, just 1% of 45–64 year olds told us they leave less than half a metre and no over-65s stated this. Drivers aged 18–24 were also the age group least likely to leave between 1m and 1.5m (24%) or between 1.5m and 2m (20%).

Q1: How much room do you leave between your car and a cyclist when overtaking on a road with a speed limit of 30mph or less? – by age



	All ages	18–24	25–44	45–64	65+
Less than 0.5m	4%	18%	6%	1%	0%
Between 0.5m and 1m	14%	21%	22%	10%	6%
Between 1m and 1.5m	32%	24%	36%	32%	31%
Between 1.5m and 2m	27%	20%	22%	31%	34%
Over 2m	22%	17%	15%	27%	28%

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We also asked drivers who also use other modes of transport, such as push bikes or motorbikes, how much room they leave when overtaking cyclists in 30mph zones.

Their responses were somewhat surprising: drivers who do not use either kind of bike state that they are most likely to leave cyclists more space. More than half of these drivers (54%) told us they leave more than 1.5m. This compares with 46% of drivers who also cycle, and a quarter (24%) of drivers who also ride motorbikes.

Correspondingly, just 1% of drivers who do not ride push bikes or motorbikes said they leave less than 0.5m when overtaking a cyclist. This compares with 12% of drivers who also ride motorbikes and 8% of drivers who also cycle.

Q1: How much room do you leave between your car and a cyclist when overtaking on a road with a speed limit of 30mph or less? – by additional travel mode

	All drivers	Drivers who also ride push bikes	Drivers who also ride motorbikes	Drivers who don't ride push bikes or motorbikes
Less than 0.5m	4%	8%	12%	1%
Between 0.5m and 1m	14%	18%	33%	11%
Between 1m and 1.5m	32%	28%	31%	34%
Between 1.5m and 2m	27%	23%	15%	31%
Over 2m	22%	23%	9%	23%

SAFE SPACE FOR CYCLISTS

Although there is no law regarding how much room you should leave cyclists when overtaking, the general guidance is to leave as much space as you would give to any other vehicle. This is often interpreted as 1.5 metres.

It is much safer for cyclists to have designated cycle lanes that are physically separated from traffic. These reduce their exposure to danger and minimise the risk of them being hit by a vehicle. The Government's Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy plans to introduce more safe paths along busy roads.⁵

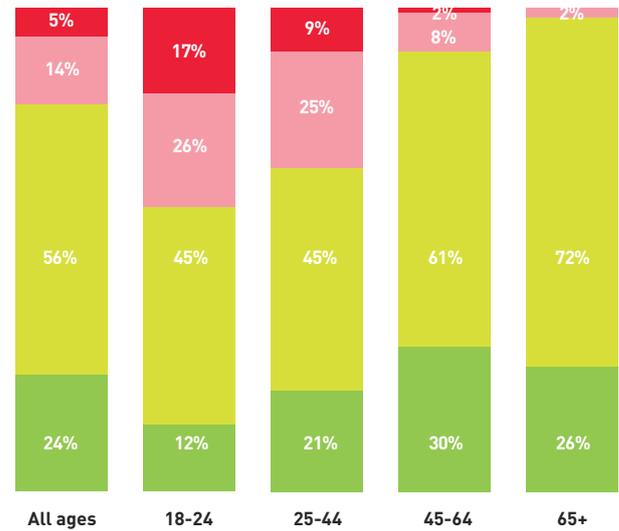
In question 2, drivers were asked if they ever drive through a crossing when the traffic lights are on amber.

More than half (56%) of drivers said they will only drive through an amber light if they have already passed the stop line or are so close that pulling up might cause a crash – this option is in line with the rules of the Highway Code. A quarter (24%) of drivers said they never drive through an amber light. However, 14% said they drive through amber lights most of the time and 5% said they do so every time.

Looking at the responses by driver age, younger drivers appear more likely to drive through amber lights than older drivers. One in six (17%) drivers aged 18–24 said they drive through amber lights every time and 26% said they drive through amber lights most of the time. In comparison, only about half as many (9%) drivers in the next age bracket (25–44) said they drive through amber lights every time, and no drivers aged 65 or older stated

this. Just 2% of drivers aged 65+ said they drive through amber lights most of the time. These figures suggest that a worrying proportion of drivers think it is acceptable to drive through amber traffic lights under most circumstances.

Q2: Do you ever drive through a crossing when the traffic lights are on amber? – by age



■ Yes, every time ■ Yes, most of the time
■ Yes, but only if I've already passed the stop line or are so close that pulling up might cause a crash ■ No, never

Drivers in Wales are the least likely to drive through a crossing when traffic lights are on amber, with none saying they do this every time they encounter an amber light, 4% saying they do so most of the time, and 63% doing so if they have already passed the line or are concerned that stopping would cause a crash. A third (34%) said they never drive through an amber light – the most anywhere in the UK.

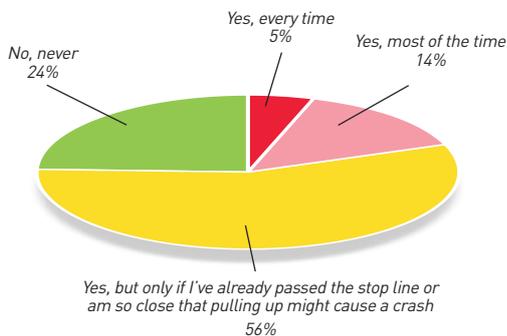
The proportion of drivers who said they never drive through amber lights was broadly similar across the remaining countries in the UK – 24% in England, 23% in Scotland and 22% in Northern Ireland. Drivers in Northern Ireland were the most likely to say they would drive through an amber light if they had already crossed the line, with two-thirds (66%) stating this compared with 60% in Scotland and 55% in England. No drivers in Northern Ireland admitted driving through an amber light every time they encounter one, whereas 6% in England said they did.

The outlier with this question, across the regions of the UK, was drivers in London. Four in 10 London drivers said they often or always drive through amber lights, with 17% saying they do so every time and 23% doing so most of the time. This is more than double the number of drivers who said they drive through amber lights every time or most of the time anywhere else in the country. Just 15% of London drivers said they never drive through an amber light.

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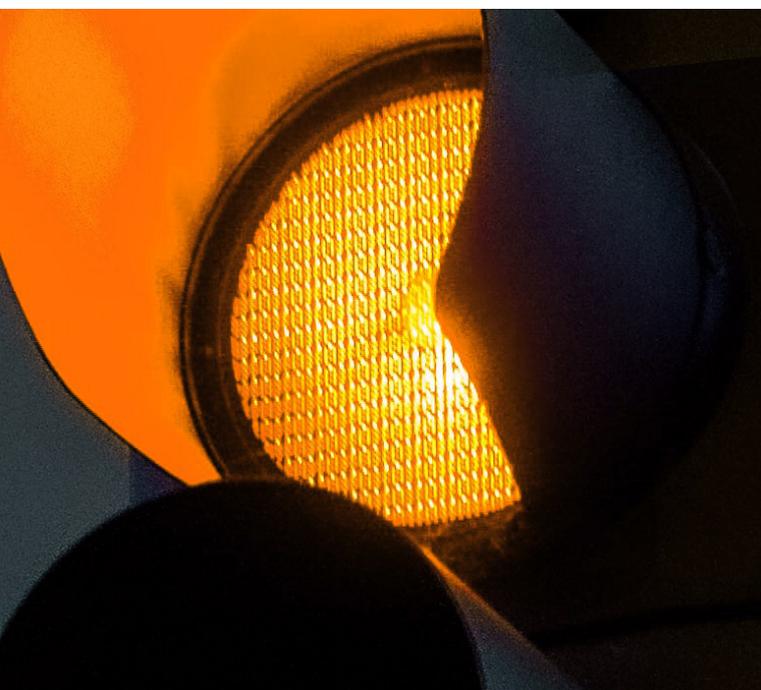
Q2: Do you ever drive through a crossing when the traffic lights are on amber? – by region



	All regions	England	London	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes, every time	5%	6%	17%	0%	2%	0%
Yes, most of the time	14%	15%	23%	4%	15%	12%
Yes, but only if I've already passed the stop line or am so close that pulling up might cause a crash	56%	55%	45%	63%	60%	66%
No, never	24%	24%	15%	34%	23%	22%

AMBER TRAFFIC LIGHTS

In the UK, drivers are required to stop at traffic lights unless the light is green. However, some drivers seem to think it is ok to drive through amber lights under any circumstances – or even accelerate towards them, with the intention of getting through before the light turns red. You should only ever drive through an amber traffic light if you have already crossed the stopping line, or if stopping your vehicle is likely to cause a crash.



SECTION 2 – DRIVER MOOD AND ITS IMPACT ON BEHAVIOUR

In this section we looked at how driver behaviour may be affected by negative mindsets.

In question 3, drivers were asked if they ever feel stressed or angry when driving.

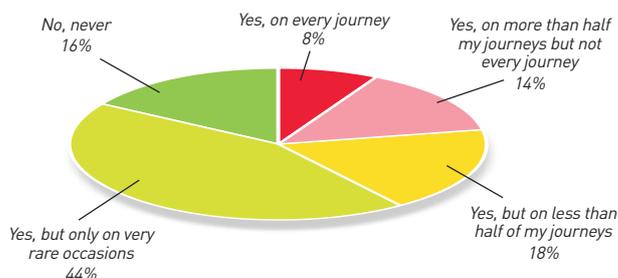
Most drivers (84%) admit feeling stressed or angry at least occasionally while driving: 8% of drivers told us they experience these emotions on every journey; 14% on more than half of their journeys; 18% on less than half; and 44% on very rare occasions.

As drivers age, they become less likely to report feeling stress or anger behind the wheel. Half (50%) of drivers aged 18–24 said they feel stressed or angry on most or all of their journeys, with 22% of drivers within this age range experiencing stress or anger on every journey. Similarly, 13% of drivers aged 25–44 said they feel stressed or angry on every journey (21% on more than half of journeys).

In contrast, drivers aged 45–64 appear much calmer, with just 3% reporting that they feel stress or anger on every journey and 8% reporting these emotions on more than half of journeys. Drivers aged over 65 are the least likely to report stress or anger (1% on every journey and 4% on more than half but not every journey).

However, until age 65+, the proportion of drivers who say they are never stressed or angry remains broadly consistent (between 14% and 16%), but rises to a quarter (24%) of drivers aged 65+.

Q3: Do you ever feel stressed or angry when driving? – by age



	All ages	18–24	25–44	45–64	65+
Yes, on every journey	8%	22%	13%	3%	1%
Yes, on more than half my journeys but not every journey	14%	28%	21%	8%	4%
Yes, but on less than half of my journeys	18%	14%	21%	20%	11%
Yes, but only on very rare occasions	44%	22%	31%	54%	60%
No, never	16%	15%	14%	15%	24%

Looking at the responses by gender, more male drivers told us they feel stressed or angry on every journey (9%) than female drivers (7%). The difference was small, however, and male drivers were also slightly more likely to say they are never stressed or angry when driving (17%), compared with 16% of women.

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Q3: Do you ever feel stressed or angry when driving? – by gender

	All drivers	Male	Female
Yes, on every journey	8%	9%	7%
Yes, on more than half my journeys but not every journey	14%	13%	14%
Yes, but on less than half of my journeys	18%	17%	19%
Yes, but only on very rare occasions	44%	43%	45%
No, never	16%	17%	16%

Almost one in six drivers in London (15%) stated that they experience stress or anger on every journey. A third of drivers in London (32%) also said they feel stress and anger on more than half of journeys, more than twice as many as those who selected this answer in England (15%), and more than 10 times the number of Welsh drivers who chose this option (3%). This may suggest that London’s drivers experience worse driving conditions than people in other areas of the country.

Q3: Do you ever feel stressed or angry when driving? – by region

	All regions	England	London	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland
Yes, on every journey	8%	9%	15%	0%	4%	8%
Yes, on more than half my journeys but not every journey	14%	15%	32%	3%	13%	12%
Yes, but on less than half of my journeys	18%	18%	13%	14%	19%	18%
Yes, but only on very rare occasions	44%	43%	28%	60%	47%	47%
No, never	16%	16%	13%	24%	18%	16%

Q3: Do you ever feel stressed or angry when driving? – 2021 update

In March 2021, a year after the initial survey question was asked and following the periods of lockdown which took place across 2020/21, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Brake surveyed 2,013 drivers on the question of whether they ever feel stressed or angry when driving, to see what may have changed.

The new data showed a 6% increase in drivers stating that they do feel stressed or angry when driving, with the largest increase (3%) for those who state they feel stressed or angry on every journey – now sitting at a rate of more than one in ten drivers (11%). This shift means that just one in ten drivers now states that they never feel stressed or angry when driving (10%), down from just over one in six (16%) in 2020. This, therefore, means that more drivers now state they feel stressed or angry on every journey, compared with those who never feel stressed or angry when driving.

	2020	2021	Change
Yes, on every journey	8%	11%	+3%
Yes, on more than half my journeys but not every journey	14%	15%	+1%
Yes, but on less than half of my journeys	18%	19%	+1%
Yes, but only on very rare occasions	44%	45%	+1%
No, never	16%	10%	-6%

In question 4, drivers were asked if they think their driving behaviour changes when they are stressed or angry.

More than half (53%) of drivers said they feel their behaviour changes when they are stressed or angry, with changes to accelerating and harsh braking behaviours emerging as the most common response (18%). Many drivers also report driving faster or becoming less focused on driving (15%), driving closer to vehicles in front (14%) and overtaking more frequently (10%).

Younger drivers were more likely to state that stress or anger changes their driving behaviour, with three-quarters (77%) of those aged 18–24 admitting some impact on their control of the vehicle. In comparison, 50% of drivers aged 45–64, and 32% of drivers aged over 65, said their behaviour changes when they are stressed or angry.

Driving faster was the most common response among 18–24 year olds, with 36% saying they tended to drive faster when stressed or angry. Younger drivers were also more likely to drive closer to vehicles in front, with 28% of drivers aged 18–24 stating this, compared with only 9% of drivers aged 45–65 and 3% of those aged 65+.

However, 18–24 year olds were the age group least likely to say they behave more aggressively to other road users, with just 6% stating this compared with 11% of 45–64 year olds.



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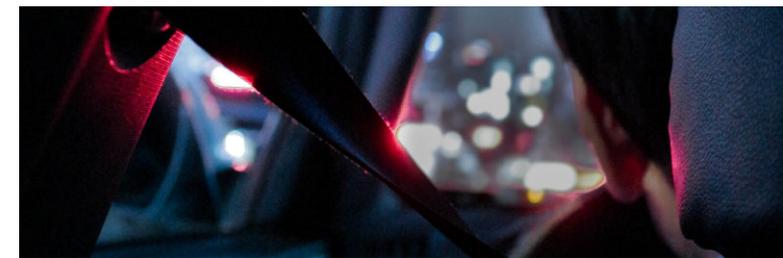
Q4: Do you think your driving behaviour changes when you are stressed or angry? – by age

	All ages	18–24	25–44	45–64	65+
Yes	53%	77%	64%	50%	32%
I tend to drive faster	15%	36%	19%	11%	5%
I tend to drive closer to vehicles in front	14%	28%	23%	9%	3%
I tend to accelerate and brake more harshly	18%	28%	25%	16%	6%
I tend to overtake more	10%	19%	15%	6%	3%
I tend to be less focused on the task of driving	15%	15%	14%	18%	13%
I behave more aggressively to other road users	9%	6%	10%	11%	7%
No	47%	23%	36%	50%	68%

Looking at responses by gender, more men said that their behaviour was influenced by stress or anger than women, with 55% of men stating this compared with 51% of women. Men were also more likely than women to drive faster, drive closer to vehicles in front and overtake more when stressed or angry. Equal numbers of men and women told us that when they were stressed or angry they were more likely to accelerate and brake more harshly, focus less on the task of driving, and behave more aggressively to other road users.

Q4: Do you think your driving behaviour changes when you are stressed or angry? – by gender

	All ages	Male	Female
Yes	53%	55%	51%
I tend to drive faster	15%	17%	13%
I tend to drive closer to vehicles in front	14%	16%	12%
I tend to accelerate and brake more harshly	18%	18%	18%
I tend to overtake more	10%	12%	8%
I tend to be less focused on the task of driving	15%	15%	15%
I behave more aggressively to other road users	9%	9%	9%
No	47%	45%	49%



EMOTIONS AND DRIVER BEHAVIOUR

Heightened emotions like stress and anger may increase the chances that a driver will be involved in a crash. Aggressive driving contributed to 110 fatal crashes in 2019, and 5% of all crashes which resulted in serious injury.⁶

Stressed or angry drivers suffer from a form of cognitive distraction that may affect their judgment and reaction times.⁷ They are also more likely to speed and take other risks such as tailgating, harsh braking or cornering, erratic lane-changing or jumping red and amber lights. Road rage itself is not a criminal offence. However, drivers who act aggressively or put other road users in danger because of their anger may still face prosecution.

MANAGING YOUR MOOD BEHIND THE WHEEL

If you find yourself feeling stressed or angry while driving, there are steps you can take to ease your mood and so potentially reduce the risk of being involved in a road crash.

- Calm, controlled breathing can help release muscular tension and relieve stress.
- Plan your route carefully, and allow plenty of time for your journey to avoid feeling pressured to rush.
- Drive at appropriate speeds for the road environment and avoid overtaking unless absolutely necessary, to reduce feelings of tension.
- Have something to eat before setting off, as hunger can affect your concentration. However, do not eat at the wheel as this could distract you from driving.
- Consider alternatives to driving, such as walking, cycling, or public transport, as these may help you to arrive feeling calmer and more refreshed.

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