

Americans take more risks when they drive rural highways, study says

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While Americans are much more likely to die on rural highways than urban freeways, a new survey released today found that they feel much more relaxed and prone to risk-taking on rural highways.

"Americans are taking unnecessary risks on rural roads," says Lee Munnich, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Excellence in Rural Safety (CERS), which sponsored the survey.

"They're more relaxed and comfortable with risk-taking on the roads where they are most likely to be killed. We have a lot of education to do."

[Rural roads](#) are particularly perilous. While U.S. Census figures show that about one out of five (21 percent) Americans live in [rural areas](#), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) has found that about six out of 10 (57 percent) highway deaths occur on roads that it considers rural. But Americans don't seem to understand the risk on rural highways, according to the findings.

For instance, 69 percent of Americans responded that they felt safe on multilane freeways in urban areas, while 79 percent felt safe on two-lane highways in rural areas.

Rural highways are also the most likely place for people to feel relaxed, with 38 percent responding that they feel relaxed on rural highways and just 19 percent feeling relaxed on urban freeways. Among rural residents, 69 percent felt relaxed on rural highways, versus just 13

percent who felt relaxed on urban freeways.

This feeling of [relaxation](#) and safety seems to lead to a bit more risk taking on the more dangerous rural highways. For instance, Americans are more likely to feel safe eating, use a [cell phone](#) and drinking and driving on rural highways than they are on urban freeways. This is particularly true of rural residents. For instance, among rural residents, 44 percent said they feel safe using a cell phone on a rural highway versus 14 percent who feel safe using a cell phone on an urban freeway.

The exception to this trend of Americans feeling more comfortable engaging in risky driving behaviors on rural highways is speeding. About half of Americans feel safe speeding on urban freeways (47 percent), while a third feel safe speeding on rural highways.

In an open-ended question, survey respondents who felt safer on rural highways than urban freeways were asked why they felt this way. The most common answer (51 percent) was that there were just fewer things on the road to worry about -- less traffic, less congestion and fewer people. The second most common answer (31 percent) was that the driver knew the area and felt comfortable in the area.

"Logic would dictate that drivers would be most cautious and alert on the most dangerous roads, but Americans seem to be lulled into a false sense of security on our tranquil rural highways," said Munnich. "It's a less chaotic experience, so it apparently feels like a safer experience. This is a myth we have to bust."

The survey was sponsored by CERS, and conducted by Critical Insights of Portland, Maine. The findings reflect responses from a national random sample of 1,205 registered voters who drive at least once per week. The margin of error is +/- 2.8 percent.

Provided by University of Minnesota

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