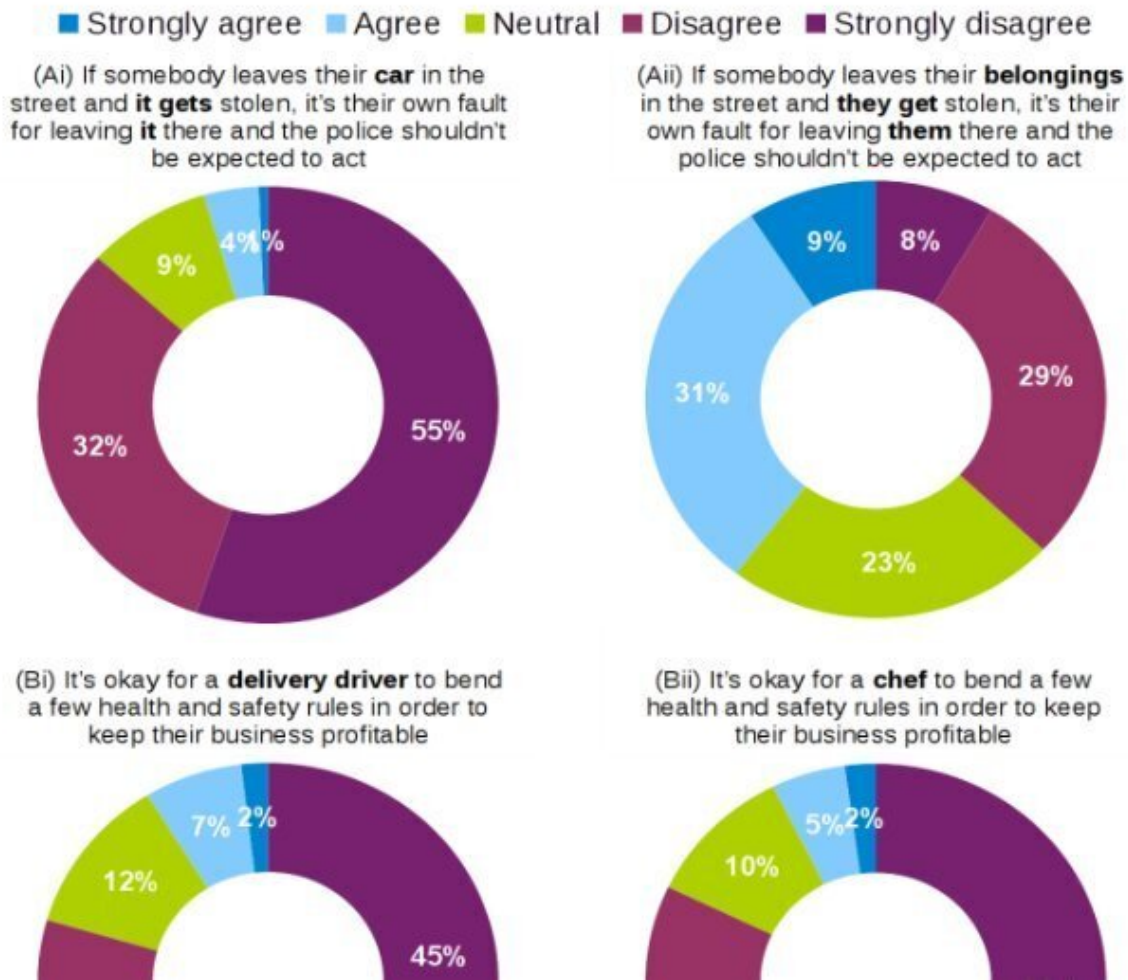


The 'blind spot' that stops us from seeing the dangers of driving

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Agreement with motor (N = 1053) and non-motor (N = 1104) question forms. People responding 'Don't know' have been omitted (31 or fewer people per question). Credit: *International Journal of Environment and Health* (2022). DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/egnmj

Is it acceptable to harm another person? It might depend whether or not there's a car involved, according to a new study from UK researchers. They showed that people have a shared 'blind spot' that can make them use different moral and ethical standards when they think about driving cars, compared to other areas of life.

The researchers from Swansea University and the University of the West of England commissioned an independent polling organization to ask 2,157 people across the UK a series of questions. Randomly, each person got a set of questions that asked about driving cars or an identical set of questions with one or two words changed so that they asked about the same underlying principles, but didn't mention driving.

The results showed that people could go from agreeing with an idea to disagreeing with it simply based on whether it was framed as a driving issue or not. For example, 75% of the UK public agreed "People shouldn't smoke in highly populated areas where other people have to breathe in the cigarette fumes," but only 17% agreed when two words were changed so that the statement was "People shouldn't drive in highly populated areas where other people have to breathe in the car fumes."

"It is nonsensical to say that making people breathe [toxic air](#) is a problem when it comes from a cigarette, but making people breathe toxic air is fine when it comes from a car," said Professor Ian Walker from Swansea University. "The underlying principle is the same, but people in our study were not using the same standards when they judged the two things."

"We saw something similar when it came to theft. If you leave your 'belongings' in the street and they get stolen, only 37% of people think the police should do something about it. But if you leave your 'car' in the

street and it gets stolen then 87% of people think the police should take action—even though the car is really just one of your belongings."

"These huge differences came from changing just one or two words in the questions. It's long been suspected that people can slip unconsciously into using different standards when they think about driving, leading them to commit a fallacy known as 'special pleading.' Our study was intended to reveal this phenomenon and show just how substantial these effects can be."

A particular reason this matters, say the team, is that it's not just the [general public](#) who have [unconscious biases](#) around motoring—it's also politicians and members of the medical profession who influence public health.

When a policymaker automatically assumes that traveling from one place to another is going to involve driving, they might harm public health by trying to make driving easier. In this case, their [blind spot](#) might create policies that increase air pollution and make travel more difficult and dangerous for all the people who move by other means—or who might like to.

"If you asked a politician whether a new hospital should be inaccessible to one-fifth of the population, obviously they'd say no," said Professor Alan Tapp, of the University of the West of England. "Whereas if you asked that same politician whether a hospital should be built on the edge of town, it's likely that many wouldn't see the problem, if they have a form of this mindset we're looking at. But in practice, having the hospital outside town is not that different from making it inaccessible when a fifth of households don't have a car."

"We regularly see [policy decisions](#)—from the location of amenities to the design of streets—that overlook the needs of people who aren't

driving, often forcing these people to make longer journeys or place themselves in danger for the convenience of people who are driving. We suggest that these shared assumptions demonstrated in our study, which we called 'motonormativity,' are a big part of the reason that such problems don't get noticed."

In their paper "Motonormativity: How [social norms](#) hide a major [public health](#) hazard," the team say that we are all surrounded by environments that promote motor travel and systematically downplay the negative consequences. These environments range from pelican crossings that make pedestrians wait for permission to cross the road while drivers automatically get a [green light](#), to advertising and media that normalize and excuse antisocial and dangerous driving.

"If all you've ever known is a world where the needs of motorists come first, there's a good chance you're going to start to understand that is the 'normal' or even the 'proper' way of things," said Dr. Adrian Davis, also from the University of the West of England.

"We saw evidence of that here. When we pulled out just the people in our survey who didn't drive, we saw that even these people were using different standards when the questions asked about driving. Their answers tended to echo what the drivers were saying, meaning it's not even simple self-interest at work. It's got to be something deeper, rooted in our culture."

The researchers end their report by calling on [decision makers](#) to start recognizing their unconscious biases on this topic, and to put in place systems to make transport decision-making more rational.

"Every [decision maker](#) needs to get used to asking themselves 'What's the underlying principle we're considering here, and would I still be happy with it if we were talking about something other than road

transport?" said Professor Walker. "Perhaps then we might stop doing things that are currently commonplace but actually really problematic when you think about them in more abstract terms, like teaching children they have a responsibility to protect themselves from adults who might hurt them."

The study is to be published in the *International Journal of Environment and Health*. A preprint of the study is available at *PsyArXiv*.

More information: Ian Walker et al, Motornomativity: How Social Norms Hide a Major Public Health Hazard, *International Journal of Environment and Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.31234/osf.io/egnmj](https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/egnmj)

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