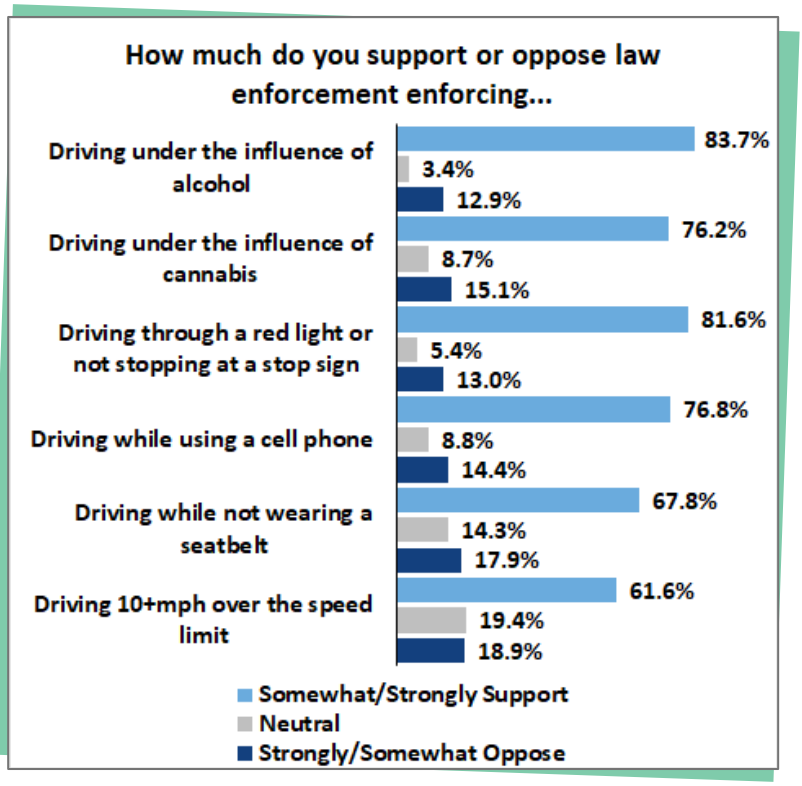
Public Attitudes Towards Traffic Safety Enforcement

In 2023 the Washington Traffic Safety Commission (WTSC) collected public input and information via listening sessions and a statewide survey that assessed people's attitudes towards proactive traffic safety enforcement[1]. Overall, public input acknowledged that the presence of law enforcement effectively results in safer driving behavior and survey results showed that there is strong support for proactive traffic safety enforcement.

I care, because traffic safety enforcement is an important safety countermeasure for improving and reinforcing safe driving behaviors

Support for traffic enforcement was positively associated with age — as age increased, so too did support for traffic enforcement. The majority of every age group supported enforcement of impaired driving, using a cell phone, red light/stop sign running, and not wearing a seatbelt. More than 75 percent of males and females supported enforcement of driving under the influence of alcohol and red light/stop sign running. All race/ethnic groups were 60 percent or more in support of enforcement of driving under the influence of alcohol.



Did you know?

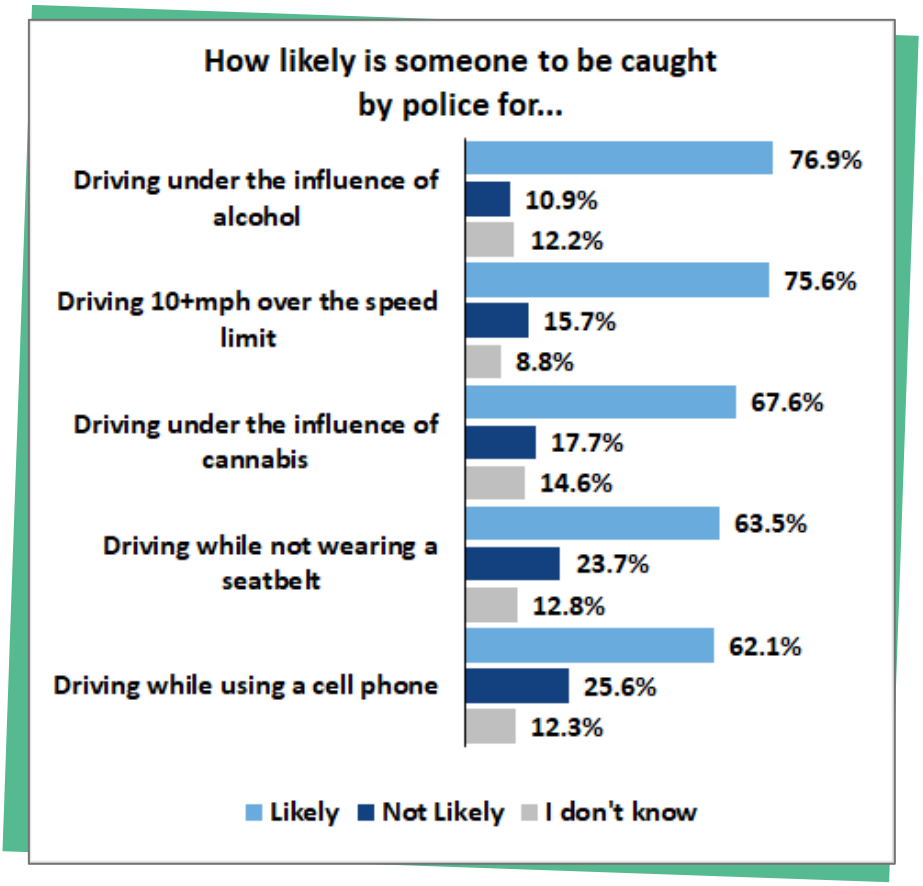
- Most Washingtonians support proactive traffic safety enforcement of impaired driving, red light/stop sign running, cell phone use, seat belt use, and speeding.
- Proactive traffic safety enforcement was most supported for impaired driving, red light/stop sign running, and cell phone use.
- Most Washingtonians believe it is more likely to be caught by police for driving under the influence of alcohol or speeding, and less likely to be caught for cell phone use or not wearing a seat belt.
- Proactive traffic safety enforcement including visible presence, warnings, and citations, as part of the Safe System Approach, is proven to improve traffic safety culture.

Survey responses showed that support for enforcement of driving under the influence of alcohol was strongest in Columbia, Island, and San Juan Counties with 95 percent or greater support. Support for red light/stop sign running was strongest in Clallam, Columbia, Garfield, Kittitas, Klickitat, Mason, Pend Oreille, San Juan, and Stevens Counties with 90 percent or greater support.

Most Washingtonians believed that it was likely that someone would be caught by police for driving in a risky or illegal manner[1].

- Three out of four survey respondents thought it was likely someone would get caught driving under the influence of alcohol or speeding 10+mph over the speed limit.
- More young respondents under the age of 35 thought it was very/extremely likely someone would be caught driving in a risky or illegal manner compared to older respondents 35 and older.
- The perceived likelihood of someone being stopped for driving in a risky or illegal manner was lower among respondents with higher education compared to respondents with lower education.

Representatives of Community Based Organizations (CBO) in Yakima and South King counties provided public input through listening sessions. Participants acknowledged that conventional enforcement using active officer presence effectively increases compliance with traffic safety laws and results in safer driving behavior. A clear and community-informed definition of safety was identified as a need when assessing the effectiveness of officer presence in safety outcomes.

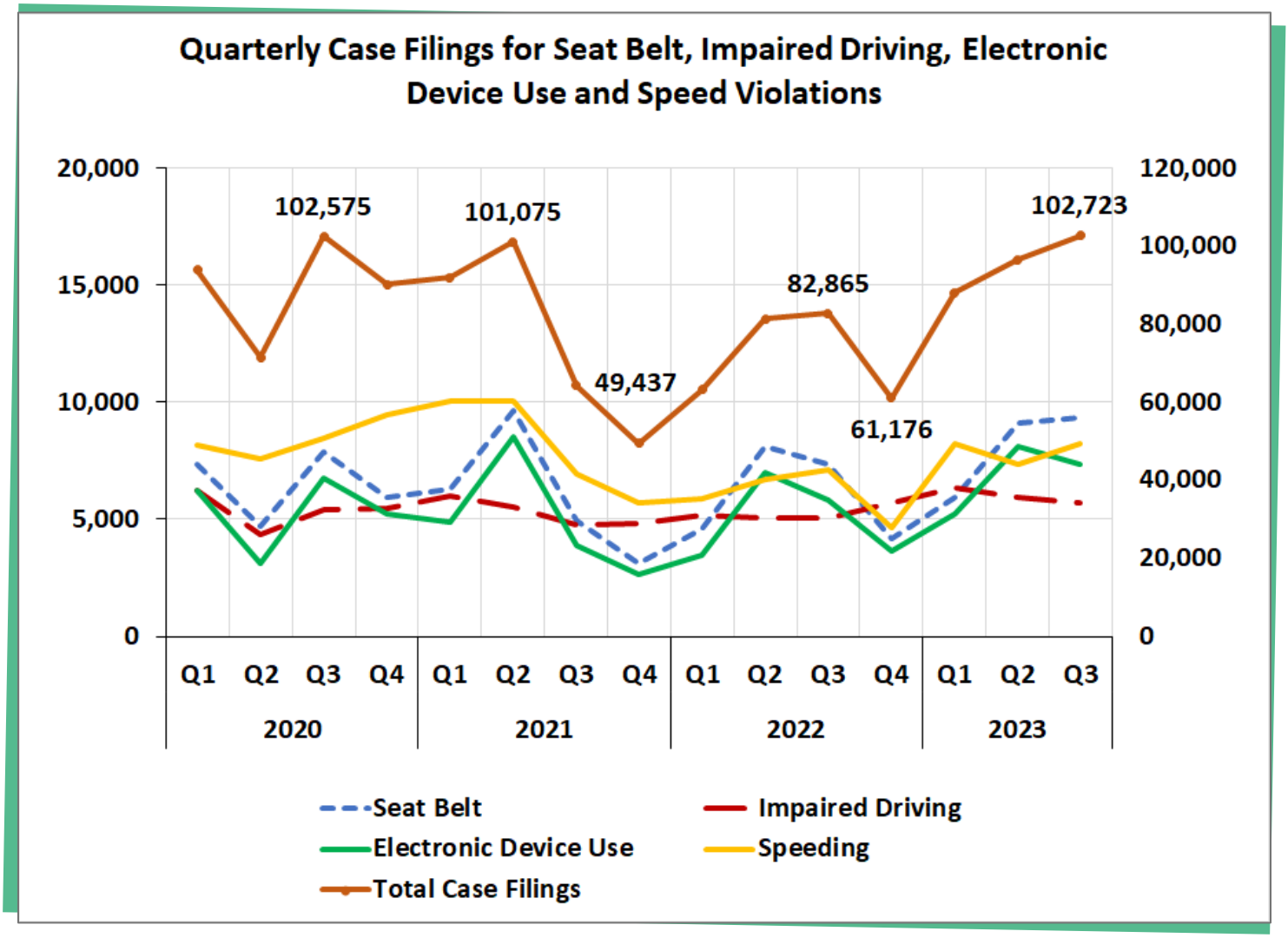


Participants discussed passive enforcement (e.g., unoccupied police vehicle parked at roadside of high speed area), active enforcement (e.g., police making traffic stops for traffic violations), and automated enforcement (e.g., speed cameras). Yakima participants expressed the need for more active policing on roads where impaired driving is a major concern. Other participants noted the effectiveness of automated enforcement in changing speeding behavior and its ability to decrease police interactions.

A study by the National Highway Safety Administration confirmed that high visibility enforcement (HVE) of traffic safety laws has a positive and measurable impact on reducing dangerous driving behavior and making roads safer[2]. The study found that seat belt usage increases by 3.5 percent when an HVE campaign is in operation. HVE campaigns were also shown to be effective at reducing hand-held phone use, lowering rates of drunk driving crashes and citations, and decreased speeds in work zones.

Quarterly case filings have varied across different behaviors in recent years[3]. Speeding garners a bulk of the case filings, followed by not wearing a seat belt and then using an electronic device. Both seat belt and electronic device use case filings decreased in Q2 of 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic which limited officer interactions with the public. There was another notable decrease in Q3 of 2021, which was when the “no pursuit” law went into effect in Washington, preventing officers from engaging in vehicle pursuits unless the fleeing party was suspected of committing a serious crime. Finally, there was another decrease in case filings in Q4 of 2022 which may be related in part to seasonal effects as traffic stops tend to dip in the late Fall.

However, impaired driving case filings remained stable across the last four years, despite barriers for officers to make traffic stops. The peaks observed for seat belt and distracted driving case filings are likely related to HVE campaigns which combine media communication with targeted enforcement. When all agencies participate in HVE, improvements in safety are immediate and improve traffic safety culture.



Traffic safety enforcement is important for changing driving behavior and increasing compliance with traffic laws. Washingtonians have signaled that they support traffic safety enforcement and local communities have expressed the need for more enforcement of the most dangerous driving behaviors.

Data Sources

[1] Washington Traffic Safety Commission Statewide Survey

[2] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, June 2022, Synthesis of Studies That Relate Amount of Enforcement to Magnitude of Safety Outcomes

[3] Administrative Office of the Courts, Judicial Information System (JIS) Case Filings

For more information, please contact the WTSC Research and Data Division at (360) 725-9860.