

Women are better drivers? New York study suggests **yes**



The female of the species is less deadly on the road than the male, says the report, which destroys the old stereotype of inept women drivers

BY ANEMONA HARTOCOLLIS
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Consider these hypothetical situations and identify the driver: mom or dad?
1. You need to get somewhere fast, and have few inhibitions about scattering pedestrians like pigeons, honking and playing chicken with anyone who dares challenge your ownership of the road.

2. You need to get somewhere in a reasonable period of time, without scaring the daylights out of anyone inside or outside the car, and without making the kids throw up in the back seat.

If you answered dad to No. 1 and mom to No. 2, you have bought into a stereotype, the kind of overgeneralization that makes open-minded people squirm. And yet, statistically speaking, you might have a point.

Among the many findings of a New York traffic study released on Monday was that 80 percent of all crashes in a five-year period in which pedestrians were seriously injured or killed involved men who were driving. The imbalance is far too great to be explained away by the predominance of men among bus, livery, taxi and delivery drivers, said Seth Solomonow, a spokesman for the city's Transportation Department.

The statistic would seem to put to rest, for good, the Mars versus Venus question of who is better behind the wheel, and to confirm what auto insurance companies and 52 percent of the city, according to a 2008 American Community Survey, knew all along.

"It has to do with our motherly instincts," said Amy Forgione, 35, a driver for 19 years. Men, she said, feel above the rules. "They feel like they control the road, that they own the road."

When she drives with her husband, Forgione said, she buckles her seat belt and holds her breath.

Social scientists and traffic safety experts say that male drivers around the world get into more than their share of bad car crashes, and that the male propensity for aggression and risk taking, fueled by testosterone, is to blame. Men, experts say, are more likely to drink and take drugs while driving, to avoid wearing seat belts, to speed and even to choose a smaller gap to turn through across oncoming traffic.

Crashes involving male drivers tend to be more severe than those involving female drivers, studies show. (Some studies show the risk-taking gap between male and female drivers to be narrowing, but still significant.)

Yet while it would appear that New York City's finding destroys the old stereotype of inept women drivers, under all that recklessness, men may still know more about cars and how to handle them, suggested Anne T. McCartt, senior vice president for research at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The high crash rate for men may be skewed because men account for about 61 percent of the kilometers driven in the country, though the gap is narrowing, federal highway statistics show. Increased driving adds to both the proficiency of the driver and the risk of getting into an accident, McCartt said.

"Part of what gets muddled when you talk about gender differences is the skill of driving and risk-taking," McCartt said. The bottom line, she said, is that "aggressive driving behavior is a bigger piece of the pie than skill" when it comes to serious crashes. "The evidence is really incontrovertible that men as drivers take more risks," she said.

The males of the species are not only more dangerous as drivers, they are more likely to be hurt while walking, the city's study found. More men than women were killed or injured as pedestrians in every age group except among those over 64 (perhaps because women live longer and were overrepresented). Boys 5 to 17 years old ranked first in the absolute number of pedestrian deaths and serious injuries, with 785, more than twice the number of girls in that age range, though elderly people were more vulnerable as a share of the population.



The New York statistics echo national numbers that show the number of fatal crashes per 100 miles (161 million kilometers) driven was about 50 percent higher for male drivers than for female drivers in 2001 to 2002, according to an analysis of the latest federal data by the insurance institute.

"These patterns are set sort of early," said Tom Vanderbilt, the author of *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says About Us)*.

"You see a lot more boys killed running into traffic," he said. This is partly because boys are given more "freedom to roam," and the culture expects them to take more risks, Vanderbilt said. "That pattern is set early but



▲ Nissan workers inspect a Nissan Fuga sedan following a collision test. Experts say men take more risks behind the wheel and cause more car crashes than female drivers.

◀ General Motors crash test dummies on display at the GM Proving Grounds in Milford, Michigan.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG

continues through every sort of life stage, including driving," he said.

A study in the UK found that boys were better at the driving portion of driving tests, and girls were better at the written portion. "But there's driving proficiency and driving behavior, and one doesn't always equal the other," Vanderbilt said.

Studies have shown that men are quicker to honk when a light turns green and honk more angrily than women, Vanderbilt said, and their aggression may get them into trouble. Similarly, a stock market study found that men made more trades than women, yet their actual performance was no better, Vanderbilt said.

Experts aside, the debate over what makes a better driver continues to rage on the streets of New York, and — guess what? — the lines are divided by sex.

The stereotype of the flighty woman is alive and well, at least for Davis Beters, 50. "Men are definitely better drivers than women," he said. "They concentrate more on the road. Women are carefree — they think about dresses, what they're going to wear. They think about makeup, and some even put makeup on while they drive!"

While the experts seem to consider aggression a bad thing, many male drivers thought it was a strength. "On the road, I think the most important things are intuition and aggressiveness," said Mark Volinsky, 24, who has been driving for six years. "It's hard even for me to conjure those up driving around the city, so I can't imagine someone like my 45-year-old mom being able to function in that kind of dog-eat-dog environment."

Rose Pinto, 34, a certified driving instructor at Sharkey's Auto Driving School, was not surprised at the city's findings. Men are overconfident, and it is their downfall, Pinto said. "Even if a guy doesn't know what he's doing, he's more inclined to say he does," she said.