

History Repeats Itself

# As the Price of Gas Goes Up, The Nation's Odometer Slows Down

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**PewResearchCenter**  
A Social Trends Report

## As the Price of Gas Goes Up, the Nation's Odometer Slows Down

In the nearly 100 years that Americans have been driving cars, the inflation-adjusted price of gasoline has drifted steadily downward, save for two sharp spikes up. One occurred a quarter century ago. The other is happening right now.

In both instances, the public reaction has been the same – roughly half of all adults say they've scaled back on their driving, while the other half say they haven't.

Among the slight majority (55%) in the latest Pew Research Center survey who say they've cut back, there's an inverse correlation with family income – that is, the less income a driver has, the more likely he or she is to have scaled back. Also, rural residents are more likely than those who live in cities or suburbs to have scaled back. Aside from that, there are few age, gender, regional or other demographic variances between those who've cut back and those who haven't.

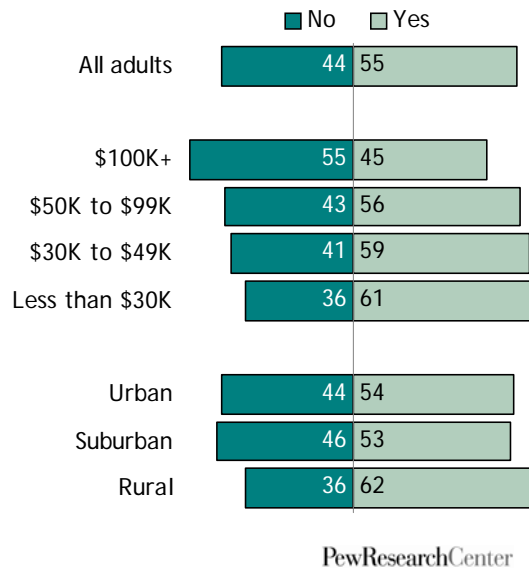
Nor is there much difference based on the type of vehicles people drive. Even though there has been a sharp decline in recent months in the sales of gas-thirsty vehicles such as SUVs and pickup trucks<sup>1</sup>, owners of these vehicles are no more, or less, likely than the rest of the public to say they've scaled back on driving.

There are, however, some differences based on how many miles people travel. Heavy travelers are less likely than light travelers to say they've cut back.

The findings are from a Pew survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,182 adults conducted from June 20 through July 16, 2006.

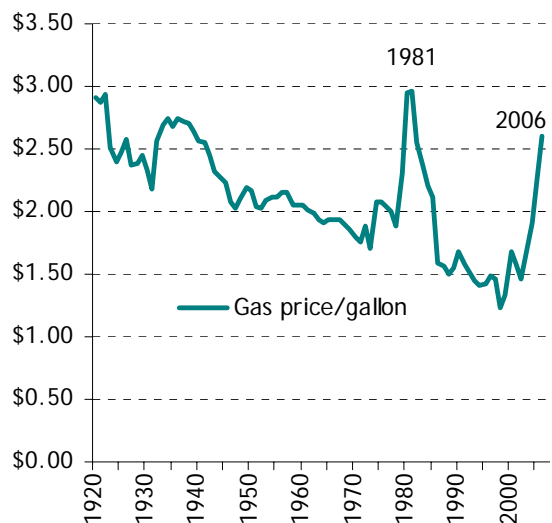
### Who's Driving Less?

Because of the rise in gas prices have you cut back on driving in any way?



### Twin Peaks: A Century of Gas Prices

Annual average price of a gallon of gas adjusted for inflation



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics and Energy Information Administration. The 2006 figure represents a seven month average - not the current price.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Jones. "Fewer Americans Are Keeping On Truckin': Sales of Pickup Trucks Are Sliding As Gasoline Prices Remain High" MSNBC, August 1, 2006. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14135024/>

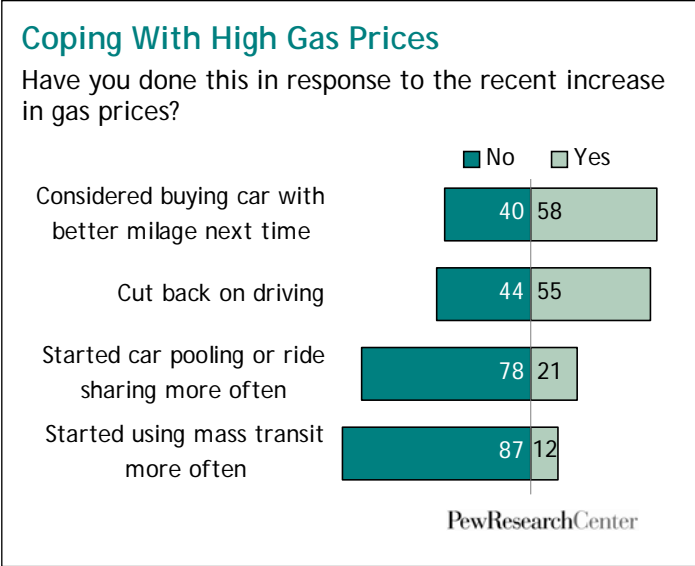
In addition to the 55% of the public who say they have cut back on driving in response to the recent gas price hike, a slightly greater number -- 58% -- say they've given serious thought to getting a car with better gas mileage the next time they buy or lease, the survey finds. Also, about two-in-ten (21%) say they have started to car pool more often in response to the gas price spike, and about one-in-eight (12%) say they have started using mass transit more often.

Younger Americans (those ages 18 to 29) are significantly more likely than their elders to have contemplated buying a more fuel-efficient car, or to have started to car pool or use mass transit more often. They are no different from older Americans, however, when it come to cutting back on driving.

Hispanics are more likely than either whites or blacks to report having started to use mass transit and to car pool more often. Also, not surprising, many more city dwellers (20%) than suburbanites or rural residents (both 8%) report that they are using mass transit more often as a result of the gas price spike.

However, despite all these self-reported efforts to conserve, a sizable majority of the public -- 71% -- says that higher gas prices are too difficult a way to achieve the goal of energy conservation, while just 17% says that there is a benefit to higher gas prices because it forces people to conserve energy.

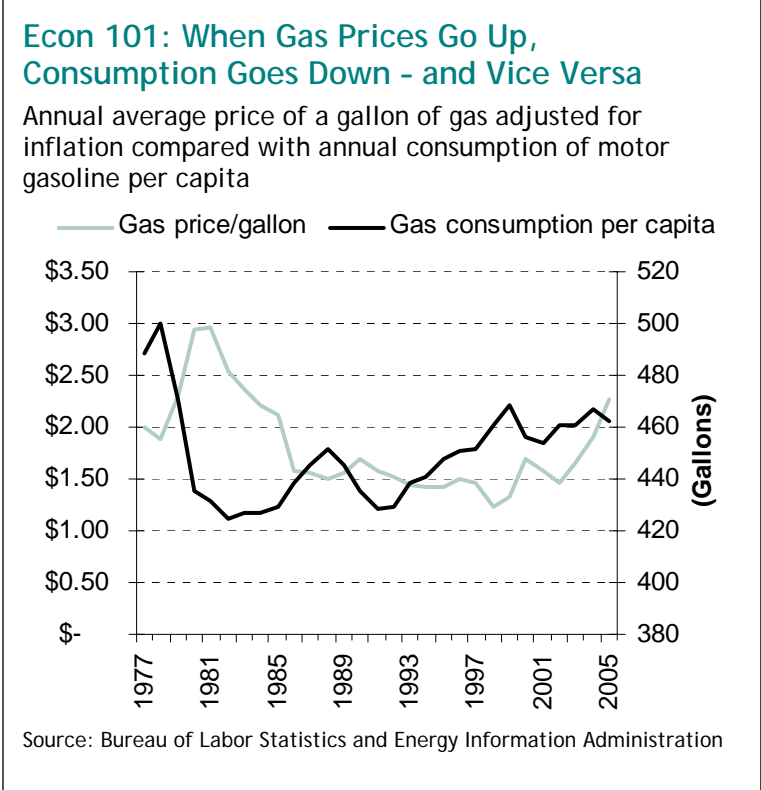
Those most likely to hold the minority view on that question include college graduates and people with annual incomes of \$100,000 or more. About one-quarter of both groups say there's a benefit to higher gas prices because its leads to energy conservation. Liberals, especially liberal Democrats, are also more likely to take the minority view on this issue (24% and 30%, respectively), but overall, Republicans, Democrats, and independents hold similar views on this question.



### Gas Consumption: How Responsive to Price Changes?

The survey findings are in sync with market data which show that, over the past several decades, when gas prices have declined, consumption has risen – and vice versa. This is classic consumer behavior, but economists have long noted that when it comes to gasoline prices, such trends tend to be more apparent over the long term than the short term. That’s because it’s difficult for people to adjust quickly to a sudden change in gas prices; most consumers cannot lightly make the decision to buy a new car, and most workers cannot easily change their commuting patterns. But over time, attitudes and behaviors do respond to market price, at least to some degree.

That was the case a quarter century ago, when a reduction in oil supply from the Middle East drove prices at the pump up to what is still their historic peak in this country – topping out at about \$3.12 a gallon (in today’s dollars) in March, 1981<sup>2</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> See U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, monthly averages for retail price of unleaded regular gasoline, adjusted for inflation to 2005 dollars. [http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/steo/pub/fsheets/PetroleumPrices\\_files/frame.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/steo/pub/fsheets/PetroleumPrices_files/frame.html)

During that period, a spate of polls (for more details see the appendix in the full report) found that somewhere between 43% and 58% of the public said they had cut back on driving, with some of the variance in those results probably the result of slight differences in the wording of questions on different polls.

More recently, gas prices spiked up sharply last September in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, then declined by an average of about 60 cents a gallon over the winter, but have since returned this summer to near their post-Katrina peaks of about \$3 a gallon<sup>3</sup>.

During this current run-up in prices, as in the late 1970s, public opinion polls show that roughly half the public is cutting back on driving – though once again, there is a range of response to this question (from a low of 48% to a high of 71%), in part due to slight variations in question wording.

### Cutting Back On Driving - Then and Now

Have you cut back on your driving in response to increases in gas prices?\*

		Yes, have done this	No/DK/ Other
		%	%
<b>Responses to recent gas price increases</b>			
July 2006	<i>Pew Research Center</i>	55	45=100
May 2006	<i>CBS News/NY Times</i>	63	37=100
March 2006	<i>Gallup/CNN/USAToday</i>	48	52=100
Oct 2005	<i>CBS News/NY Times</i>	64	36=100
Sept 2005	<i>Newsweek</i>	71	29=100
April 2005	<i>Gallup/CNN/USAToday</i>	48	52=100
June 2004	<i>Gallup/CNN/USAToday</i>	45	55=100
<b>Responses to gas price increases in the 1970s</b>			
Jan 1981	<i>Cambridge Reports</i>	56	44=100
May 1980	<i>ABC News/Harris</i>	55	45=100
Oct 1979	<i>Cambridge Reports</i>	58	42=100
July 1979	<i>CBS News/NY Times</i>	56	44=100
June 1979	<i>CBS News/NY Times</i>	44	56=100
May 1979	<i>LA Times</i>	41	59=100
April 1979	<i>ABC News/Harris</i>	43	57=100
April 1979	<i>Cambridge Reports</i>	46	54=100
April 1977	<i>CBS News/NY Times</i>	40	60=100

\* Note: The question wording and response options for each survey organization differ. Full details in the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> See U.S. Department of Energy, Energy Information Administration, monthly averages for retail price of unleaded regular gasoline, adjusted for inflation to 2005 dollars.  
[http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/steo/pub/fsheets/PetroleumPrices\\_files/frame.html](http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/steo/pub/fsheets/PetroleumPrices_files/frame.html)

## Who Drives What...

No matter how people have responded to the recent surge in gas prices, the survey finds that the kinds of vehicles people drive affirm some familiar stereotypes in the popular culture.

Some 55% of all drivers say they most often drive a car while 19% say SUV, 17% say pick-up truck and 9% say van or mini-van.

But there's a significant gender variance in these patterns. When it comes to their primary vehicle, more women than men drive cars (61%, compared with 49% among men); SUVs (21%, compared with 16% among men) and vans (12%, compared with 6% among men). Meantime, men (28%) are nearly five times more likely than women (6%) to drive a pick-up truck as their primary means of transportation.

There are also differences by community type. More than a quarter (27%) of rural residents drive a pickup truck as their primary vehicle, roughly double the percentage of city residents (13%) and suburbanites (15%) who do so.

When it comes to SUVs, the most significant variances are by age, income and having kids. Nearly three in ten (29%) of those who earn more than \$100,000 a year drive a SUV as their main vehicle, compared with just 10% of those who earn less than \$30,000 a year. Also, SUV drivers account for 25% of the 30-to-49-years old drivers, but just 9% of those ages 65 and older. Parents of minor age children are more likely than those without such children to be driving SUV's.

## What Kind of Car Do You Drive Most Often?

	Car*	SUV	Truck	Van*	Other/DK	N
All Drivers	55	19	17	9	*=100	1048
<b>Gender</b>						
Men	49	16	28	6	1=100	472
Women	61	21	6	12	*=100	576
<b>Age</b>						
18-29	66	14	16	2	2=100	128
30-49	46	25	18	11	*=100	395
50-64	53	17	19	11	0=100	284
65+	71	9	10	9	1=100	215
<b>Education</b>						
College grad	58	22	9	10	1=100	384
Some college	56	19	17	8	0=100	265
HS grad or less	53	16	21	10	*=100	398
<b>Family Income</b>						
\$100K+	53	29	9	9	0=100	157
\$50K-\$99K	48	23	21	8	*=100	291
\$30K-\$49K	60	18	15	7	*=100	217
Less than \$30K	59	10	19	11	1=100	232
<b>Region</b>						
Northeast	57	21	8	14	0=100	180
Midwest	54	15	20	11	*=100	272
South	51	22	18	8	1=100	388
West	61	16	17	6	0=100	208
<b>Location</b>						
Urban	58	20	13	9	*=100	312
Suburban	57	19	15	8	1=100	505
Rural	45	16	27	11	1=100	231
<b>Parenting Status</b>						
Have children						
under 18	46	26	17	11	*=100	376
No children						
under 18	61	14	16	8	1=100	669

Question asked of drivers.

\*Car includes sedans and sports cars. Vans include mini-vans.

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### ...and How Far

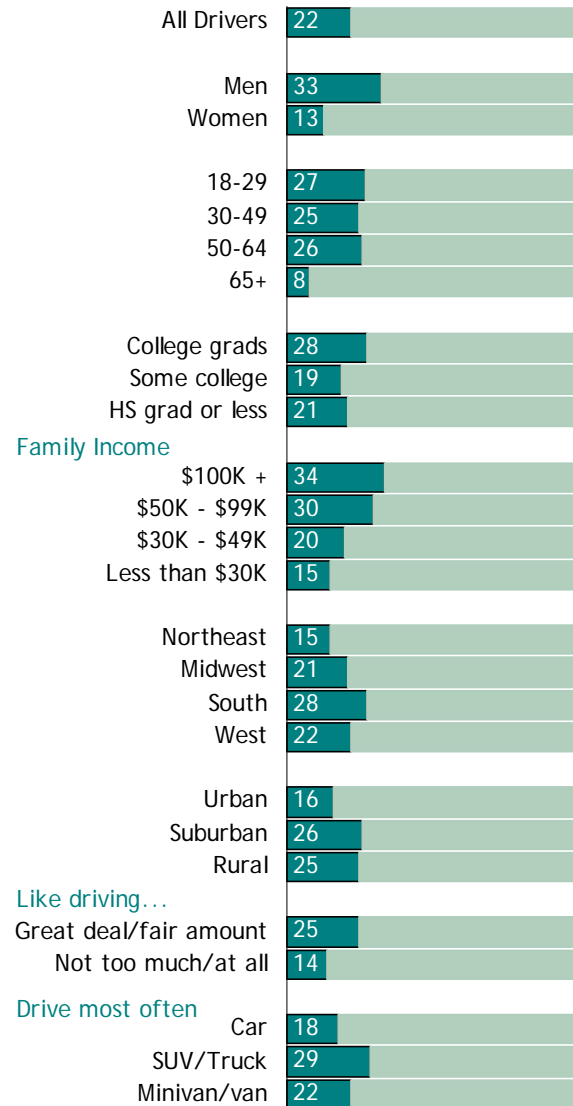
More men than women are heavy drivers (defined as having driven at least 15,000 miles in the past year); so are more younger drivers than older drivers; more high income drivers than low income drivers; more suburban and rural drivers than urban drivers; and more drivers who live in the south, west and midwest than in the northeast.

Not surprisingly, people who like to drive tend to rack up the most movement on their odometers.

And so do people for whom the primary vehicle is a SUV or pickup truck rather than a car, sedan or minivan.

### Who Are the Road Warriors?

Percent driving more than 15,000 miles in the past year



Note: Question asked of drivers

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## About the Pew Social Trends Reports

The Pew social trends reports explore the behaviors and attitudes of Americans in key realms of their lives – family, community, health, finance, work and leisure. Reports analyze changes over time in social behaviors and probe for differences and similarities between key sub-groups in the population.

The surveys are conducted by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world.

Survey reports are the result of the collaborative effort of the social trends staff, which consists of:

Paul Taylor, Executive Vice President  
Cary Funk, Senior Project Director  
Peyton Craighill, Project Director

## About the Survey

Results for this survey are based on telephone interviews conducted with a nationally representative sample of adults, ages 18 years and older, living in continental U.S. telephone households.

- Interviews conducted June 20-July 16, 2006
- 1,182 interviews of which 1,048 were conducted with drivers.
- Margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points for results based on the total sample at the 95% confidence level and 3.3 percentage points for results based on all drivers. The margin of sampling error is higher for results based on subgroups of respondents.

Survey interviews conducted under the direction of Princeton Survey Research Associates International. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish.

Bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias in the findings of opinion polls.

## Related Reports from the Pew Research Center

Americans and Their Cars: Is the Romance on the Skids? August 2006. Pew Research Center.

<http://pewresearch.org/social/pack.php?PackID=16>



PEW SOCIAL TRENDS  
 FINAL TOPLINE  
 June 20 - July 16, 2006  
 N=1,182

QUESTIONS 1 THROUGH 7 HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.

ASK ALL IN MODULE [N=1182]:

Now, I have a few questions about driving.

Q.8 Do you drive a car or other vehicle, or don't you?

	<i>Gallup</i> <sup>4</sup>
	<u>March 1991</u>
87 Yes	89
13 No	11
<u>1</u> Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)	<u>0</u>
100	100

ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):

Q.9 About how many miles did you drive in the past 12 months? Would you say (READ)

BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:

27 Less than 5,000
28 5,000 to under 10,000
22 10,000 to under 15,000
11 15,000 to under 20,000
11 More than 20,000
<u>1</u> Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)
100

QUESTIONS 10 TO 13 IN PREVIOUS RELEASE

Q.14 How much do you like to drive? (READ)

BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:

	<i>Gallup</i>
	<u>March 1991</u>
20 A great deal	29
53 A fair amount	51
22 Not too much	16
4 Not at all	3
<u>1</u> Don't know/Refused (VOL.--DO NOT READ)	<u>1</u>
100	100

QUESTIONS 15 TO 18 IN PREVIOUS RELEASE

<sup>4</sup> The 1991 Gallup trend did not include the phrase "or don't you?"

**ASK IF DRIVER (Q8=1):**

Q.19 Which of the following best describes the type of vehicle that you drive most often for personal use? **(READ)**

**BASED ON THOSE WHO DRIVE [N=1048]:**

- 51 Car or sedan
  - 9 Van or mini-van
  - 19 Sport Utility Vehicle or SUV
  - 17 Truck
  - 4 Sports car
  - \* Something else **(SPECIFY)**
  - 0 Don't drive **(VOL.—DO NOT READ)**
  - 0 No car **(VOL.—DO NOT READ)**
  - 6 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.--DO NOT READ)**
- 100

**NO QUESTION 20 OR 21**

**ASK ALL IN MODULE [N=1182]:**

Q.22 Please tell me which, if any, of the following things you, yourself, have done in response to the recent increase in gas prices. Have you **[INSERT ITEM; RANDOMIZE]**

**IF NECESSARY:** Have you done this as a result of the recent increase in gas prices, or not?

	Yes, have done	No, doesn't apply	Don't know/ Refused
a. Cut back on your driving in any way	55	44	1=100
September 2005 <i>Newsweek</i>	71	28	1=100
b. Given serious thought to getting a car with better mileage the next time you buy or lease a vehicle	58	40	2=100
September 2005 <i>Newsweek</i>	57	40	3=100
c. Started car pooling or ride sharing more often	21	78	1=100
d. Started using mass transit more often	12	87	1=100

Q.23 Which of these statements comes closer to your view? **[READ]**

- 17 Some people think that there is some benefit to higher gas prices because it forces people to conserve energy
  - OR
  - 71 Others think that while conserving energy is important, higher gas prices are too difficult a way to do it
  - 6 Neither **(VOL.)**
  - 6 Don't know/Refused **(VOL.--DO NOT READ)**
- 100

**NO QUESTION 24  
QUESTION 25 TO THE END HELD FOR FUTURE RELEASE.**

## Survey Questions on Cutting Back on Driving Due to Gas Prices

<b>Pew Research Center</b>		Yes, have done	No, doesn't apply	Don't know
Please tell me which, if any, of the following things you, yourself, have done in response to the recent increase in gas prices. Have you... <b>cut back on your driving in any way</b>	Jul 2006	55	44	1=100

<b>Newsweek</b>		Yes, have done	No, doesn't apply	Don't know
Please tell me which, if any, of the following things you, yourself, have done in response to the recent increase in gas prices. Have you <b>cut back on your driving in any way</b>	Sep 2005	71	28	1=100

<b>Gallup/CNN/USAToday</b>		Yes, have	No, have not	No opinion
As a result of the increase in gas prices over the past year, have you and your family <b>cut back significantly on the amount you drive</b> , or not?	Mar 2006	48	52	0=100

<b>Gallup/CNN/USAToday</b>		Yes, have	No, have not	No opinion
As a result of the recent rise in gas prices, would you say you have – or have not – done each of the following? How about -- <b>Cut back significantly on how much you drive</b>	Apr 2005	48	51	1=100
	Jun 2004	45	54	1=100

<b>CBS News/NY Times</b>		Yes	No	Unsure
As a result of the recent increase in gas prices, have you <b>cut down on the amount of driving you do?</b>	May 2006	63	36	1=100
	Oct 2005	64	33	3=100
	Aug 2005	70	29	1=100

<b>Cambridge Reports</b>		Cut down on amount of driving	Drive pretty much as I always have	Don't drive (vol.)	DK
Have recent increases in the prices of gasoline caused you to <b>cut down on the amount of driving you do</b> , or do you pretty much drive as you always have?	Jan 1981	56	34	9	1=100
	Oct 1979	58	33	8	1=100
	Apr 1979	46	41	10	3=100

<b>Los Angeles Times</b>		Drive less	Drive about the same	Drive more	Not sure/don't drive
Do you drive a car at least once a week? (If yes) Because of the gasoline shortage, do you find that you are driving less now than you were a year ago, about the same, or are you driving more?	May 1979	41	41	5	13=100

<b>ABC News/Harris</b>		Drive less	Not drive less	(vol.) No car/don't drive	Not Sure
Has the rising price of gasoline caused you to drive less or not?	May 1980	55	31	12	2=100
	Apr 1979	43	46	10	1=100

<u>CBS News/New York Times</u>		Cut back	Remained the same	Increased	DK/ No Car
In the last month or so, have you <b>cut back on the amount of driving you do</b> , or has your driving increased, or has it remained about the same? <i>(The phrase "in the last month or so" was only used in July 1979.)</i>	Jul 1979	56	30	3	11=100
	Jun 1979	44	40	2	14=100

<u>CBS News/New York Times</u>		Cut back	Same as in past	Drive more (vol.)	DK/ No Car
During the past few years, did you cut back on driving, or was it important to you to drive as many miles as you have in the past?	Apr 1977	40	39	3	18=100