

Car culture: Our toxic love affair

Can't live with or without our cars, a new B.C. poll suggests

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More than half of B.C. drivers believe cars are destroying the environment, yet almost all of us love having an automobile and close to three-quarters think our lives would be thrown into a tailspin if we did not own a motor vehicle, a new poll has found.

On other aspects of our car culture, about two-thirds of those surveyed say unsafe drivers are a critical or significant problem and a similar number believe drivers are increasingly becoming rude, aggressive and nasty.

And a little more than half of those surveyed said they are struggling to pay all the costs associated with owning a car.

Those are some of the key findings that provide a snapshot of our enduring love-hate relationship with the car in a poll done for the British Columbia Automobile Association by Innovative Research Group Inc.

"We are hooked on our cars," Innovative Research managing director Greg Lyle said. "Some of us love them, others think they are a plague on the planet, but the vast majority of us can't easily live without them.

"Today, cars remain in some ways very much the same as the cars our grandparents knew -- a platform on four wheels powered by an internal combustion engine," Lyle noted.

"Yet the role of cars in our lives has changed fundamentally. Today, cars are not just a sporting plaything, they are fundamental to the way we live our lives."

Despite the stresses created by congestion and dangerous drivers, 94 per cent of respondents to the BCAA survey said they "love the convenience of having a car to get around."

Seventy-two per cent agreed their "life would be turned upside down if [they] did not have a car" and 68 per cent said "one of the real pleasures in life is driving on an open road."

Fifty-five per cent believe that driving alone is a time to relax and have a break from the day's worries.

The BCAA survey notes that while they may enjoy their cars and driving, only 35 per cent report that their vehicle is their "pride and joy." Drivers under 35 years of age are most likely to agree.



CREDIT: Vancouver Sun file

More than half of B.C. drivers believe cars are destroying the environment, a new poll suggests.

Fifty-two per cent of respondents agree "it is a struggle to pay all the bills that come with owning a car." Drivers under 45 are most likely to agree with the statement.

There are also environmental concerns. Fifty-five per cent of respondents agree that "cars are an environmental plague on this planet."

Sixty-four per cent of Vancouver drivers concur, compared to 53 per cent in the suburbs and 54 per cent outside of the Lower Mainland.

Seventy-three per cent disagree with the statement that cars are really not much of an environmental problem.

The survey notes that despite appreciating the destructive impacts automobiles have on the environment, B.C. drivers don't appear to connect those impacts to their own actions.

Just 30 per cent of respondents say that "every time I use my car I feel guilty about the impact I am having on the environment."

Forty-one per cent of Vancouver drivers are more likely to agree with that view than suburban drivers (31 per cent) and those outside the Lower Mainland (26 per cent).

Additionally, three-quarters of respondents agree that they "know driving a car is bad for the environment, but there are a lot of other things that are much worse."

Sixty-eight per cent agree that "more and more it seems when people get behind the wheel of their cars, they drop all their manners and become a much nastier person." Bad drivers make 63 per cent of respondents "crazy" but only 15 per cent say they become nervous when they drive.

With regard to perceived problems associated with our car culture, 65 per cent of respondents say unsafe drivers are a critical problem that requires immediate action or are a significant problem that needs to be dealt with soon.

Critical or significant problems associated with traffic congestion (52 per cent) come in second place after unsafe drivers followed by air quality (42 per cent) and the amount of land committed to roads and parking lots (28 per cent).

Asked what the future may hold for vehicles over the next century, 78 per cent believe "cars will remain our main mode of personal transportation, but powered by new technology such as hybrid-electric engines or hydrogen fuel cells."

Ten per cent say cars "will be forced out of cities in favour of public transit, walking and cycling." Six per cent think cars "will be replaced by some other form of personal transportation."

Lyle said the survey results clearly outline society's addiction to the automobile and its internal combustion engine.

"Even if we wanted to pull away from our use of the car, we can't. We lead lives built around the car."

"Our dependence on the car seems to cause us to avoid dealing with the problems created by the car."

Lyle said the survey also shows that people in Vancouver who have access to efficient transit systems -- as well as being able to walk to work or ride bikes -- and plentiful, nearby shopping are

not as dependent on the car as those living in the suburbs or the rest of the province.

As a result, he said, people in Vancouver are also more open to the environmental problems caused by motor vehicles.

BCAA commissioned the survey of more than 600 British Columbians as part of its 100th birthday celebration.

A random sample of 619 drivers in the province was interviewed by telephone between April 27 and May 4. The sample was drawn to equally cover drivers in Vancouver, Lower Mainland suburbs and the rest of the province.

Lyle said a sample of this size is considered accurate to within plus or minus 3.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Data was weighted according to the 2001 census to reflect the actual demographic breakdown.

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