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**Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation  
Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, Maritime, Freight, and Ports  
“Examining the Roadway Safety Crisis and Highlighting Community Solutions”  
May 21, 2024**

Chairman Peters, Ranking Member Young, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting AAA to be here today to share our perspective on roadway safety.

As you may know, AAA is a federation of motor clubs in North America serving over 64 million members. Our members are users of the nation’s surface transportation system. They are drivers, passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, and public transportation users. Transportation plays a vital role in their lives and, of course, underpins the economic well-being of this nation.

AAA’s interest in transportation safety and personal mobility began more than 120 years ago. We remain committed to these goals today as the United States faces record-breaking traffic deaths despite advances in vehicle safety technology, infrastructure safety investments, and lifesaving traffic laws.

As a public health practitioner and epidemiologist, I consider traffic injuries and deaths an overlooked public health threat to Americans, an entirely preventable threat. In my testimony today, I would like to spend a little time highlighting some of the reasons the U.S. traffic safety experience is poor as compared to other developed nations around the world, and then offer some recommendations for how we can maximize the safety impact of the historic investments Congress recently made in the nation’s transportation system.

**Factors Contributing to Increased Highway Fatalities**

As the United States continues to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, traffic fatalities remain unacceptably high. Risky driving behaviors play a critical role in traffic crashes and contribute to an unsafe transportation environment for Americans traveling both inside and outside vehicles.

AAA has worked to understand what drove traffic deaths to a 16-year high in the years immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that unpacking this issue is an important first step in saving lives on our roadways. Over the last few years, researchers at the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety have used data from a variety of sources to help illuminate what is happening on U.S. roads. Let me walk you through some of what we uncovered.

Behavioral Risk Factors in Fatal Crashes. The most recent data available through the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) managed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), told us that behavioral factors such as speeding, alcohol impairment, and non-use of seatbelts account for a considerable proportion of the increased fatalities.<sup>1</sup> Notably, the post-COVID-19 spike in vehicle occupant fatalities was almost entirely among people not wearing seatbelts.<sup>2</sup>

Other important factors worth noting include the rural-to-urban shift relative to where most traffic deaths occur. Historically, we saw more fatalities on rural roads, with higher speeds, run-off road crashes, head-on collisions and delayed access to medical care for the injured as contributing factors. According to NHTSA, more people have been killed annually on urban roadways as compared to rural roadways since 2016. Between 2013 and 2022, urban traffic deaths increased by 66% and rural traffic deaths decreased by 2.6%. Urban and rural roadways saw small decreases in traffic deaths between 2021 and 2022.

Though this shift began well before the pandemic, it has major implications for vulnerable road users like pedestrians and cyclists who are more concentrated in urban areas and thus have greater exposure to motor vehicles. For example, pedestrian deaths increased by 81% since 2013 in urban areas but dropped in rural areas by 10% during the same period.

The rural-to-urban shift has impacted traffic death rates mostly on urban and suburban arterial roads, which are typically multi-lane, medium-high speed, high-volume roads originally designed to move vehicles in and out of cities quickly. Development along these roads has changed the way they are predominantly used. They were built for “through traffic”, but now people live, work, and shop along them creating more potential for crashes.

Pedestrians and cyclists are not the only vulnerable road users to note. In 2021, motorcyclists represented 14% of traffic fatalities despite comprising only 3.5% of registered vehicles, highlighting their vulnerability. They are nearly 24 times more likely to die in crashes per vehicle miles traveled compared to occupants of passenger vehicles, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The post-COVID spike in fatalities has been disproportionately among disadvantaged populations, particularly among low socioeconomic status (i.e., no college degree) populations.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, AAA’s analysis of CDC data shows that the excess mortality since the pandemic was disproportionately among the Black and Hispanic populations.

The high degree of risk faced by vulnerable users of the nation’s roadways makes much more sense when we look at what kinds of risky behaviors drivers admit to engaging in while behind the wheel.

Self-Reported Risk-Taking Behaviors Among Motorists. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety is committed to deepening its understanding of America’s behavior behind the wheel and conducts the Traffic Safety Culture Index survey annually. As the impacts of traffic safety on public health have worsened, responses from this annual survey offer important insights into understanding public perceptions of, attitudes toward, and engagement in unsafe driving behaviors. They are aspects that should be considered when developing countermeasures.

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<sup>1</sup> National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2024, April). Overview of motor vehicle traffic crashes in 2022 (Traffic Safety Facts Research Note. Report No. DOT HS 813 560). National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

<sup>2</sup> Tefft, B.C. & Wang, M. (2022). *Traffic Safety Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Fatal Crashes Relative to Pre-Pandemic Trends, United States, May–December 2020* (Research Brief). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

<sup>3</sup> Brian C Tefft, Rebecca Steinbach, COVID-19 Pandemic Exacerbated Socioeconomic Disparities in Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 2024

To understand the rise in dangerous driving behaviors, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety combined data from its Traffic Safety Culture Index with data from its American Driving Survey, which records the daily driving patterns of the U.S. population. Our researchers explored whether the pandemic changed the composition of drivers on the road. They found that while most drivers (60%) reduced their driving during the pandemic, a small proportion (4%) increased their driving. Making matters worse, those who increased their driving appeared to be riskier than average, even after accounting for their age, gender, and how much they drove.<sup>4</sup>

Digging deeper, our researchers found that unsafe driving behaviors, including speeding (+12%), red-light running (+10%), drowsy driving (+8%), and driving impaired on cannabis (+14%), rose from 2020 to 2021. The most alarming increase was among drivers admitting to getting behind the wheel after drinking enough that they felt they were over the legal limit – an increase of nearly 24%.<sup>5</sup>

Using self-reported data on specific motorist behaviors, AAA researchers were able to group drivers according to which risky behavior they *predominantly* engage in. The most common dangerous behaviors were speeding (23%), distracted driving (15%), and aggressive driving (17%). Upon further examination, researchers found that many risky drivers in this study were classified into profiles that involved speeding behavior. The major implication here is that increased enforcement of speed limit laws will deter other risky driving behaviors like impaired driving and red-light running. This law enforcement measure can be expected to have the greatest impact on safety through general deterrence and apprehension of drivers who break traffic laws proven to save lives.

Challenges in Traffic Enforcement. Rising traffic fatalities are correlated with drops in the enforcement of lifesaving traffic safety laws. Citations for dangerous behaviors like speeding and driving under the influence have decreased by as much as 50% in some parts of the country.

A 2019 survey of law enforcement agencies by the International Association of Chiefs of Police<sup>6</sup> found national labor shortages across the profession. The survey cited challenges related to increased retirements and resignations and decreased recruitment tied to negative perceptions of law enforcement.

Over the last two years, AAA has worked to understand potential approaches to achieve the dual goals of improved traffic safety and more equitable traffic enforcement. During this time, we have discussed research-based recommendations with over 25 national and state-level organizations and government agencies. Research literature has not yet uncovered a single policy, training program, or other intervention that serves as a panacea for addressing racial disparities in traffic enforcement. However, there are promising approaches that evidence has shown to help mitigate these disparities and improve traffic safety outcomes. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- *Continuous collection and proper use of traffic stop data.* At least 23 states plus D.C. mandate the collection of traffic stop data (albeit non-standardized) to detect racial profiling. Most states and law enforcement agencies lack the expertise to properly analyze it, leverage it for intervention purposes, or use it for evaluation of implemented countermeasures, but several states including

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<sup>4</sup> Tefft, B. C., Villavicencio, L., Benson, A., Arnold, L. S., Kim, W., Añorve, V., Horrey, W. J. (2022). Self-Reported Risky Driving in Relation to Amount of Driving During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Research Brief). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

<sup>5</sup> AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. (2023). 2022 Traffic Safety Culture Index (Technical Report). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

<sup>6</sup> International Association for Chiefs of Police. (2019). The State of Recruitment: A Crisis for Law Enforcement. Alexandria, V.A.: International Association for Chiefs of Police.

Connecticut<sup>7</sup> and California have good practices and support programs in place.

- *Re-prioritization of traffic stops.* Evidence shows that reducing traffic stops for vehicle equipment or administrative violations and prioritizing safety-oriented moving violations like speeding, impaired, distracted, and aggressive driving can mitigate racial disparities in traffic enforcement, without increases in non-traffic crimes, and may bring *reductions* in traffic crashes, injuries, and deaths.<sup>8</sup> A recent analysis of federal crash data conducted by the Center for Policing Equity showed that of the 272,921 vehicles involved in fatal crashes nationally between 2017 and 2021, only 638 (0.2%) involved vehicle maintenance or equipment issues (e.g., defective lighting, wipers, defective mirrors or windshields) as contributing factors to the crashes.

In short, traffic enforcement is one of several important strategies for preventing traffic deaths. To achieve the dual goals of safety and equity we need to explore pathways to enhancing trust between police and the communities they serve and protect. Through efforts like these, we will gain community support for the kind of traffic enforcement that targets risky driving behaviors like speeding and impaired driving.

### **AAA Recommendations for Change**

AAA acknowledges the need for fresh approaches to move toward zero traffic fatalities. Continuing with past approaches will not yield different outcomes. AAA proposes the following recommendations for your consideration as you assess current programs and explore novel avenues to enhance transportation safety.

Through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, Congress made funding available to states via the Section 1906 Racial Profiling Prohibition Grant program. This grant program has offered significant support to several state efforts to start or enhance their police stop data programs. AAA believes a key limiting factor to greater demand among states to tap into 1906 funding is the lack of guidance and technical support available to them to understand how to properly standardize and analyze these data to draw accurate conclusions from them. Equally as important is guidance for states relative to effective collaboration with law enforcement agencies to address inequities illuminated by these stop data.

1. Recommendation – Increase funding for states via the Section 1906 Racial Profiling Prohibition Grant program and establish a U.S. Center of Excellence for Equitable Traffic Enforcement to help states effectively navigate this important issue and help police confidently enforce traffic laws that save lives with community understanding and support. Most police departments do collect some form of stop data but do not analyze or use it. We all benefit from making traffic enforcement more equitable and efficient to maximize road safety.

AAA is a strong supporter of adopting the Safe System Approach (SSA) to roadway safety. The SSA uses effective countermeasures to create multiple layers of protection for transportation network users. It has been leveraged by other developed nations to achieve huge gains in transportation safety driving down traffic deaths—47% (Australia) and 80% (Spain).

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<sup>7</sup> Connecticut Racial Profiling Prohibition Project. (<https://www.ctrp3.org/>)

<sup>8</sup> Fliess MD, Baumgartner F, Delamater P, Marshall S, Poole C, Robinson W. Re-prioritizing traffic stops to reduce motor vehicle crash outcomes and racial disparities. *Inj Epidemiol.* 2020 Jan 20;7(1):3.

As you know, the U.S. Department of Transportation has already committed to adopting this approach, and the Federal Highway Administration has already issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) to better integrate the SSA into state highway safety planning processes. This is significant progress.

2. Recommendation – Roadway engineers, but especially behavioral highway safety practitioners and policymakers would benefit from more guidance and technical assistance relative to the proper adoption of SSA principles to maximize measurable safety gains. The AAA Foundation is currently developing such guidance, but widespread adoption of this or similar guidance is critical.

Through grant programs like *Safe Streets and Roads for All*, Congress directed \$5 billion to local communities, especially historically underinvested locations where such investment can help close significant disparities in traffic safety outcomes. Critical to the success of this kind of community-level investment is garnering the support of residents. An unintended consequence of modernizing roadway infrastructure in a historically underinvested community is fear of displacement, or worse, this fear being fully realized. The IJA already requires States to pursue meaningful public participation and engagement, particularly in communities most significantly impacted by traffic crashes resulting in injuries and fatalities. 23 U.S.C. 402(b)(1)(B). The *Safe Streets and Roads for All* grant program would benefit from a similar requirement.

3. Recommendation While the *Safe Streets and Roads for All* grant program encourages an analysis of community input, AAA believes that State and local transportation leaders would benefit from more guidance and technical assistance relative to the appropriate outreach, education, solicitation of input, and adoption of local preferences for infrastructure investments made where they live. To ensure that community residents are the same people who benefit from this historic Congressional investment in roadway safety, careful attention must be paid to garnering local support for the infrastructure-based solutions to the safety challenges that exist locally. This front-end work will help drive greater demand for current and future investments made possible by Congress.

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety recently published new research documenting the “spillover effect” whereby traffic crash experiences on surrounding roadways can be exacerbated unintentionally when speed limits are raised on nearby highways or highway segments<sup>9</sup>. To minimize unintended safety consequences, it is important for transportation departments, at all levels, to coordinate and work closely together when considering posted speed limit adjustments.

4. Recommendation – Require state/local coordination when determining changes to maximum posted speed limits on higher speed state-owned highways. Since vulnerable populations like pedestrians and bicyclists are more concentrated near arterials and local roads, close coordination between state and local road authorities is needed to account for the “spillover effect.”

According to an analysis conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Alcohol-detection systems that stop people from driving with BAC levels of 0.08 or higher would save about 10,000 lives annually, once penetration of the technology in the U.S. passenger vehicle fleet is complete. By integrating the HALT Act into the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act*, Congress took the first step toward saving more lives in the U.S. since the implementation of the safety belt. Unfortunately, the

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<sup>9</sup> Romo, A. , McDonough, J. , Wei, A. & Yang, C.Y.D. (2024). *Uncovering the Spillover Effect from Posted Speed Limit Changes: A Tool to Examine Potential Safety Concerns* (Technical Report). Washington, D.C.: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is expected to miss the Congressionally mandated deadline for issuance of a final rule by November 15, 2024.

5. Recommendation – Ensure strong Congressional oversight of HALT Act implementation. Though NHTSA is likely unable to reasonably issue a final rule by the required deadline, Congress can ensure that NHTSA issues an NPRM by that same deadline, November 15, 2024.

### **Conclusion**

AAA recognizes that the challenges before you are not easy. But, what Congress has made possible through the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* and the *Safe Streets and Roads for All* grant program has the potential for a significant boon for safety. The task moving forward ought to be leaning in on what is working well and actively pursuing the opportunities available to maximize the potential public good.

Through this work, we can maximize safety for the communities that bear a disproportionate burden of traffic injury and death on our roadways. Targeting disparities in transportation safety is how the U.S. can sprint instead of crawl toward saving as many lives as possible on our nation's roadways.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.