

AP-AOL poll: High gas prices forcing changes in Americans' lives

By WILL LESTER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Half the people in the country say record-high gas prices are starting to cause them problems. Who's to blame? Americans point a finger at the oil companies, foreign nations that control the oil supply, and politicians.

More than half say they're cutting back on driving, and many plan to stay closer to home on their summer vacations.

An Associated Press-AOL poll found 51 percent of those surveyed say that if gas prices remain high for the next six months it will cause a financial hardship for them. Thirty percent of those polled classified the hit as "serious," according to the survey conducted by Ipsos-Public Affairs for the AP and AOL News.

"You have to decide gas, groceries, medicine," said Marcia Cain of Indianapolis, who is semi-retired. "I'm on limited income. I don't go out as much eating out, going to listen to jazz. It uses gas you don't want to use."

Cain paid \$2.15 per gallon this week after paying \$2.35 per gallon the week before. "It aggravates me, but there's not much I can do about it," she said.

High global oil prices have

pushed the cost of regular gasoline for U.S. motorists to around \$2.21 per gallon, with prices ranging from an average of \$2.64 in California to about \$2 in Oklahoma, according to the auto group AAA. Prices are expected to remain above \$2 nationally through the summer.

Americans spread the blame around, with 29 percent blaming the oil companies, 24 percent blaming foreign governments that dominate oil reserves and 23 percent saying politicians. Eight percent blame the high prices on "environmentalists who want to limit oil exploration," while 6 percent blame "people who drive gas-guzzling vehicles."

Anxiety about gasoline prices comes as President Bush is pressing Congress to approve energy legislation that includes tax breaks and subsidies, mostly for energy companies, and would open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil development. The House passed its version of the bill Thursday.

The president gets low marks from the public for his handling of the nation's energy problems, with 62 percent saying they disapprove. When he first took office, people were more inclined to say he would handle energy problems effectively.

Many people, 41 percent, say gas prices are making them

seriously consider purchasing a more fuel-efficient vehicle.

Sales of big trucks and SUVs are off at General Motors. And purchases of Ford's largest SUVs, the Excursion, Expedition and Explorer, all fell by more than 24 percent in the first three months of the year.

Auto makers that produce hybrid cars that run on a combination of electricity and gas are reporting strong interest from consumers.

Seidi Miller, who lives in Sumter, S.C., and serves in the Air Force, spent almost \$80 or \$2.10 a gallon the last time he filled up his Chevy Silverado truck. He has considered getting something that would be less of a gas-guzzler.

"If it were feasible for me to buy another (more fuel-efficient) vehicle and keep my truck, I would," Miller said.

The survey found gas prices have prompted 58 percent to reduce their driving, 57 percent have cut back on other expenses and 41 percent have changed vacation plans to stay closer to home.

"We're going to end up with a couple of short trips," said Tom Brewer, a father of three from Gable, Ohio. "We will stay within two or three hours from home."

"The last time I was at the gas pump, it was \$1.96 and then it was \$2.25 right after I finished,"



KATIE FALKENBERG/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Charles Dunphy of Washington fills up his gas tank at a Washington station Thursday. More than half of Americans say they're cutting back on driving and making other adjustments in their lives to deal with soaring gasoline prices, an AP-AOL poll found. About the same number say that unless something changes, they expect those high prices will cause them financial hardship. The poll found that 51 percent said they expect high gas prices are going to cause money problems in the coming months, and three in 10 in this country say gas prices will cause them "serious hardships."

Brewer said. "The next poor guy had to pay 29 cents higher."

Dermot Garety, a New York University economics professor, said it takes time for consumers to

feel the full impact of gas prices.

"The next time they buy a vehicle in two or three years they may be more careful to get a more fuel-efficient one," he said. "It's a

relatively slow adjustment."

The poll of 1,000 adults was taken April 18-20 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

More high school students facing alcohol testing at prom, after-hours events

By MARTHA IRVINE
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It was getting so few teachers at Westwood High School in suburban Boston wanted to chaperone school dances. There were drunken quarrels and dramas. At one school event, a student was rushed to the hospital with alcohol poisoning.

"It's a drag to deal with it," one teacher told assistant principal Emily Parks. And that's how she and other school administrators were feeling, too. "It's frankly kind of frightening when you have students who've had enough to drink that it's presenting a safety

problem," Parks says.

So, in recent weeks, she and fellow administrators adopted a policy that a growing number of schools are using to deter drinking at after-hours events: They're now testing students who enter school dances, including the upcoming prom, with Breathalyzers.

Some teens complain the testing policies are intrusive and misdirected. They include 18-year-old Jason Speakman, who thinks officials' efforts would be more effective if they tested students as they left events.

"Kids getting into cars stumbling drunk THAT'S a problem," says Speakman, a high

school senior in Barrington, R.I., where school officials are considering alcohol tests.

If he were asked to take a test when entering a school event, he says he would refuse even if he'd had no alcohol. "I just feel like it's a violation of privacy," he says.

In an attempt to be less disruptive, officials at some schools only use alcohol testing on students they suspect have been drinking ones who might have slurred speech or are chewing a lot of gum to hide the odor.

"Without a Breathalyzer... you have to be lucky or the kid has to be stupid," says Rich Garrabone, a social worker at Newton South

High School in Newton, Mass., where testing is done on a case-by-case basis. "This makes the guess work out of it."

Last fall, officials at the school expanded testing to a night football game.

That outcome prompted student newspaper editor Chiraag Mundhe to write an editorial suggesting that giving students advance warning would do more to deter underage drinking.

"It really didn't curb the problem or just punished kids," says Mundhe, a 17-year-old senior.

He's more supportive of the type of policy adopted at nearby Westwood High, where every

student entering dances must take a Breathalyzer test.

At North Central High School in Indianapolis, an early adopter of alcohol testing, that's been the rule for 10 years. And Principal D.E. Quandt has never had a student test positive.

"You can't protect kids 14-17, but you can make the experience they have here a positive one," Quandt says. "We're not going to 'wink-wink' the issue. There is a right and wrong."

Now some parents are following suit.

Worried about a spate of drunk driving accidents, Steve Sherrets, a father in Independence, Iowa,

purchased his own tester, a brand known as Alcohawk, to monitor his two teenage sons.

"At first, they said 'You can believe us,'" Sherrets says of his sons' reaction. "And I said, 'Well, I'm sure that's what the kids told their parents before they got into accidents, too.'"

Some say testing isn't a cure-all.

"Anyone who thinks Breathalyzers are going to solve the problem is kidding themselves," says Stephen Wallace, national chairman and CEO of Students Against Destructive Decisions, also known as SADD. "It can be somewhat effective, but it's only one tool in the toolbox."

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