

## A Look at Houston's Worst (And Most Dangerous) Commutes

No one who lives in the Houston area will be surprised to learn that we have some of the toughest commutes in the country. Even so, the seriousness of the problem is staggering.

Channel 2 Investigates took a look at some of the worst commutes in Houston, including I-45 from Farm-to-Market Road 646 downtown at 7:30 AM (53 minutes) and State Highway 288 from Pearland to downtown (nearly 40 minutes). As we get into the spring and summer, those times may get even worse due to road construction.

### Breaking down accident risks in Houston gridlock

One of the most common causes of car accidents in heavy traffic is **distracted driving**. The longer motorists are in the car, the more likely they are to whip out their smartphones or tablets or engage in other distracting behaviors behind the wheel.

Many drivers think it's safe to read or send a text message during the "stop" part of stop-and-go traffic, for example. The problem is that even if you finish physically sending the text while your vehicle is stopped, **your brain remains distracted** for a minute or two afterward – and during that time, you're putting yourself and others at risk.

Another common hazard in heavy traffic is **tailgating**. Closely following the car in front of you won't get you to your destination any faster, but many Houston drivers do it anyway. While tailgating, the vehicle in front of you obscures your vision, making it harder to see and react to hazards. When tailgaters slam on their brakes, the vehicles behind *them* may not have enough time to react, causing a crash or even a multi-vehicle pileup.

More generally, **aggressive or reckless driving** is a serious problem in heavy traffic. Many motorists weave from lane to lane or drive too fast when they have a rare stretch of open highway in order to get ahead. The truth is that you're unlikely to shave more than a minute or two off your commute with these tactics, if even that. How often have you seen someone speed past you only to come to a screeching halt behind the next car in front of you?

### The best ways to avoid an accident during your commute

Under Texas law, motorists are required to exercise due caution in order to avoid causing accidents. The more cars on the road, the more important it is to be careful. Here are a few ways to stay safe in gridlock:

**Plan ahead:** Give yourself plenty of time to get to your destination. There are many websites that provide up-to-the-minute, detailed traffic information for Houston commuters. These websites include Houston Transtar as well as apps like Waze or Google Maps. Just make sure to only use these apps or websites when you're safely stopped before or after your journey.

**Maintain safe following distance:** Again, tailgating is dangerous. Leave plenty of room in case the car in front of you stops short. If someone cuts in front of you, brake slowly in order to gradually build that following distance back up.

**Keep your attention on the road:** Just because you're going slowly doesn't mean you can afford to take your eyes off the road. Avoid distractions and put your phone away.

**Don't rush:** See an opening? Odds are that you aren't the only driver who sees it – and if you rush into it, you may get sideswiped or T-boned. Unless you absolutely need to move over, it's best to stay in your lane.

**Signal your intentions clearly:** If you do need to change lanes, use your turn signals and maneuver carefully. If your exit is coming up, move over ahead of time instead of cutting into the right lane at the last minute.

**Stay calm:** We know this can be difficult, but it's important. No matter how frustrating your commute is, driving aggressively is only going to make it worse. Keep your cool and drive defensively until you're at your destination.

**If you need help:** If your car breaks down on the road, there are several places you can contact for immediate assistance. This includes AAA if you're a member of the association and Tow and Go, which provides no-cost towing to motorists in the Houston area who "have broken down on area freeways from mechanical failure, reducing traffic congestion and the chance of dangerous secondary incidents that put lives at risk." You can also contact Tow and Go to report a breakdown on the highway after you safely finish your commute.

Ultimately, the only driver you can control is yourself. When you are sharing the road with thousands of other motorists, there is always the danger that another driver's negligence will cause a wreck that leaves you hurt. If that happened to you, contact Smith & Hassler, Attorneys at Law, for a free legal consultation.