

Distracted Driving

What Is Distracted Driving?

There are three main types of distraction:

- Visual — taking your eyes off the road
- Manual — taking your hands off the wheel
- Cognitive — taking your mind off what you're doing

Distracted driving is any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving and increase the risk of crashing.

While all distractions can endanger drivers' safety, texting is the most alarming because it involves all three types of distraction.

Other distracting activities include:

- Using a cell phone
- Eating and drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming
- Reading, including maps
- Using a PDA or navigation system
- Watching a video
- Changing the radio station, CD, or Mp3 player.

Did You Know?

Research on distracted driving reveals some surprising facts:

- Using a cell phone while driving, whether it's hand-held or hands-free, delays a driver's reactions as much as having a blood alcohol concentration at the legal limit of .08 percent. (Source: University of Utah)
- Driving while using a cell phone reduces the amount of brain activity associated with driving by 37 percent. (Source: Carnegie Mellon)
- 80 percent of all crashes and 65 percent of near crashes involve some type of distraction. (Source: Virginia Tech 100-car study for NHTSA)
- Nearly 6,000 people died in 2008 in crashes involving a distracted or inattentive driver, and more than half a million were injured. (NHTSA)
- The worst offenders are the youngest and least-experienced drivers: men and women under 20 years of age. (NHTSA)
- Drivers who use hand-held devices are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves. (Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety)

Driver Distraction Facts and Figures

Important information regarding driver distraction comes from records of traffic fatalities and injuries collected by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Overview

Driver distraction could present a serious and potentially deadly danger. In 2008, 5,870 people lost their lives and an estimated 515,000 people were injured in police-reported crashes in which at least one form of driver distraction was reported on the police crash report. Distracted driving comes in various forms, such as cell phone use, texting while driving, eating, drinking, talking with passengers, as well as using in-vehicle technologies and portable electronic devices.

There are other less obvious forms of distractions including daydreaming or dealing with strong emotions.

While these numbers are significant, they may not state the true size of the problem, since the identification of distraction and its role in a crash can be very difficult to determine using only police-reported data. New data sources are available to provide more details on the type and presence of driver distraction.

Highlights

Police-reported data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) and the National Automotive Sampling

System (NASS) General Estimates System (GES) show that:

- In 2008, there were a total of 34,017 fatal crashes in which 37,261 individuals were killed.
- In 2008, 5,870 people were killed in crashes involving driver distraction (16% of total fatalities).
- The proportion of drivers reportedly distracted at the time of the fatal crashes has increased from 8 percent in 2004 to 11 percent in 2008.
- The under-20 age group had the highest proportion of distracted drivers involved in fatal crashes (16%). The age group with the next greatest proportion of distracted drivers was the 20- to-29-year-old age group (12%).
- Motorcyclists and drivers of light trucks had the greatest percentage of total drivers reported as distracted at the time of the fatal crashes (12%).
- An estimated 21 percent of 1,630,000 injury crashes were reported to have involved distracted driving.

The National Motor Vehicle Crash Causation Survey (NMVCCS) is a nationally representative survey specifically focused toward documenting events and conditions leading up to crashes.

- NMVCCS captures distraction as an associated factor to the crash and/or as the critical reason that made the crash imminent. Driver distraction was coded as the critical reason

in 18 percent of the crashes. Data describing the specifics of the distraction — for example adjusting the radio or eating — are included in this data set.

Another method for collecting pre-crash data is through naturalistic driving studies, in which vehicles are equipped with cameras and data recording equipment.

- During NHTSA's 100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study, driver involvement in secondary tasks contributed to more than 22 percent of all crashes and near-crashes recorded during the study period.

Data Sources

The following NHTSA data sources were used in the research:

- Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS)
- National Automotive Sampling System (NASS) General Estimates System (GES)
- National Motor Vehicle Crash Causation Survey (NMVCCS)
- The 100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study
- National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS) of Driver Electronic Use
- Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey (MVOSS)

Use of Electronic Devices While Driving

A 2008 survey by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reveals an increase in the use of electronic devices while driving and some regional differences in this practice.

Overview

The percentage of young drivers texting or using other hand-held electronic devices has increased from 2007, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2008 nationwide survey, which provides the only nationwide probability-based observed data on driver electronic device use in the United States. The survey shows that the hand-held cell phone use rate in 2008 translates into 812,000 vehicles being driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone at any given moment during daylight hours. It also translates into an estimated 11 percent of all vehicles that had drivers who were using some type of phone (hand-held or hands-free).

Highlights

- Nationwide, those drivers observed visibly manipulating hand-held electronic devices increased from 0.7 percent to 1.0 percent.
- Some 1.7 percent of drivers 16 to 24 years old were observed visibly manipulating hand-held electronic devices, up from 1.0 percent the previous year.
- More drivers in Western States were observed manipulating hand-held electronic devices (2.1%) than in the other regions of the country (from 0.4% in the Northeast to 0.8% in the Midwest).

- The use of hand-held devices increased the most in the West, from 0.6 percent in 2007 to 2.1 percent in 2008.
- The observed use rate of hand-held electronic devices was higher among females (1.2%) than among males (0.8%).

Methodology

The results above are from the National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), which provides the only nationwide probability-based observed data on driver electronic device use in the United States. The NOPUS is conducted annually by the National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA) of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The survey observes usage as it actually occurs at randomly selected roadway sites. The survey data is collected by trained observers at probabilistically sampled intersections controlled by stop signs or stoplights, where vehicle occupants are observed from the roadside. Data is collected between 7 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Only stopped vehicles are observed to allow time to collect a variety of information required by the survey, including subjective assessments of occupants' age and race. Observers collect data on the driver, right-front passenger, and up to two passengers in the second row of seats. Observers do not interview occupants, so that the NOPUS can capture the untainted behavior of occupants. The 2008 NOPUS data was collected between June 2 and June 22, 2008, while the 2007 data was collected between June 4 and June 25, 2007

General information on distracted driving

- In 2008, nearly 6,000 people died on American roadways in crashes that involved distracted driving. Distracted driving can take many forms. It applies to anything that takes your eyes off the road for more than two seconds, takes your hands off the steering wheel, or interrupts your concentration while driving.
- The use of cell phones or other electronic devices while driving is a significant and growing concern, particularly since it has increased exponentially in recent years.
- Recent research indicates that texting while driving represents an even greater risk than talking on cell phone. Texting while driving involves a convergence of visual, manual and cognitive distractions that make this practice especially hazardous and a potentially deadly.
- Young drivers are especially at risk. Their lack of driving experience can contribute to critical misjudgments if they become distracted, yet they text more than any other age group. It's a trend that poses a growing danger, and therefore it's important to address this issue now.
- The U.S. Department of Transportation convened a Distracted Driving Summit in late September that brought senior transportation officials, elected officials, safety advocates, law enforcement representatives and academics to Washington, D.C., to help identify the specific factors involved in distracted driving and discuss how to combat it.
- The Summit addressed distracted driving across all modes of surface transportation, including rail, transit, commercial trucks and passenger vehicles. One of the key outcomes of the Summit was a new directive from President Obama that impacts federal employees and contractors.
- On October 1, 2009, President Obama signed Executive Order 13513, Federal Leadership on Reducing Text Messaging While Driving. Among other things, the Order prohibits all federal employees and contractors from engaging in text messaging while:

- Driving vehicles that are owned, leased or rented by the government.
- Driving privately owned vehicles while on official Government business.
- Using electronic equipment supplied by the government (including cell phones, Blackberrys and other electronic devices) to text while driving any vehicle.