

Teens
and

DISTRACTED DRIVING



TEEN
Health
and
Safety

By Jennifer Simms

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WHAT IS DISTRACTED DRIVING?

The NHTSA defines distracted driving as “a specific type of driver inattention. Distraction occurs when drivers divert their attention from the driving task to focus on some other activity.”⁷

There are three types of driver distractions. The first is visual distraction, meaning the driver’s eyes are not on the road, like when looking at a cell phone screen. The second is manual distraction, meaning the driver’s hands are off the steering wheel, like when adjusting the radio. The third is cognitive distraction, meaning the driver’s mind is not thinking about driving, like when mentally replaying an argument with a friend. Sometimes an activity causes more than one type of distraction at the same time, making it even more dangerous. For example, retrieving an item from behind the seat can cause a visual and manual distraction. Texting, on the other hand, causes all three.

Often the term *distracted driving* is synonymous with cell phone use. And cell phones do create a wide variety of distractions, such as calling and texting, using music and mapping apps, taking photos, and updating social media. The popularity of the *Pokémon Go* mobile game in 2016 even tempted drivers to play games while behind the wheel.



Drivers can be distracted in many ways. Some distractions include using a phone or eating.

But distracted driving is broader than just cell phone use. It includes any activity that takes the driver's focus from the road. These activities include eating a hamburger or drinking coffee, adjusting the radio or climate controls, talking to other passengers, putting on makeup or shaving, reading the newspaper, managing young children, or driving with a pet in the car. Distractions can come from outside the vehicle, such as when a driver looks at an accident as she passes. They also include mental distractions, such as daydreaming or worrying. Any of these activities can steal a driver's attention, making her less capable of responding to sudden changes and increasing the potential for a crash.

In addition to distracted driving, there are many other ways a driver can become impaired and can cause a crash. Drunk driving, drugged driving, and drowsy driving are also types of driver impairment. Though these activities may at times be paired with distracting activities, they are not considered distracted driving. They have their own categories on police accident reports, and they have separate legislation that governs these behaviors.

Though awareness around distracted driving has increased in recent years, it is not a new problem. A 1969 study found that a driver's ability to see the road and make good decisions was impaired when he or she was talking on the early versions of car phones. In 2001, New York became the first state to pass a hands-free law, making it illegal to drive while holding a cell phone. Drivers can still talk on the phone, but they must be using a headset, speakerphone feature, or microphone through the vehicle.

More recently, distracted driving officially entered the national consciousness when, in 2009, Webster's New World Dictionary named it the word of the year. "I think its rapid intrusion into our national vocabulary shows what an epidemic distracted driving has become," former transportation secretary Ray LaHood commented on his White House blog.⁸

Since then, state and local governments have passed more laws to ban texting and other distracting activities while driving. Cell phone service providers have launched distraction-free campaigns. And victims of distracted driving have continued to speak about the consequences. Yet, despite these efforts, crashes continue to make headlines. A crash in Texas in March 2017, in which a twenty-year-old driver slammed into a church bus and killed thirteen senior citizens, made the national news. The cause of the crash: texting.

DISTRACTED DRIVING OR CARELESS DRIVING?

The actual number of distracted driving crashes each year is likely greater than the number reported in national statistics. Why the difference? According to the 2015 AAA study of teen drivers, “Police records frequently fail to identify whether or not distraction was involved in the crash.”

Reasons police may underreport distracted driving include reliance on driver confession, the use of different crash reporting forms in different jurisdictions, and the tendency to report the cause of a crash as failure to obey traffic rules when it is difficult to prove driver distraction. This is what happened in the case of Michelle Begley, a Colorado woman killed while making a left turn in 2015. Eyewitnesses claimed the driver of the pickup that struck Michelle’s car appeared distracted: he was looking in his lap and did not swerve or brake before impact. When police examined his phone, they found evidence of texting, but not at the moment of the crash. Since the cause of the distraction could not be proven, the driver was charged with failure to obey traffic signals for running the red light.

L. J. Blincoe, T. R. Miller, E. Zaloshnja, B. A. Lawrence, “The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010 (Revised),” *National Highway Traffic Safety Administration*, May 2015. www.nhtsa.gov.

More Common Than People Think

Driver distraction may be more common than people realize, especially when considering the widespread use of cell phones. According to a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center, 95 percent of Americans owned cell phones and 77 percent owned smartphones. A 2017 study done by the automotive advocacy group Zendrive says drivers are using them with alarming frequency. The study analyzed 3.1 million drivers over a three-month period and found that in 88 percent of these driving trips, the drivers were on

their smartphones. The researchers behind the study noted, “When extrapolated for the entire U.S. driving population, the number goes up to roughly 600 million distracted trips a day.”⁹

Zendrive also found average phone use was 3.5 minutes per hour of driving time. “This finding is frightening, especially when you consider that a two-second distraction is long enough to increase your likelihood of crashing by over 20 times.”¹⁰ Even though the Zendrive study focused only on smartphone use and did not include other forms of distraction, distracted driving is clearly widespread on US roads.

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—Noah Budnick, Director of Public Policy and Government Affairs for Zendrive

Distracted Driving and Road Fatalities

Statistics from the NHTSA show Americans are not only driving distracted, they’re causing crashes. In 2015, 14 percent of all motor vehicle crashes reported by police were caused by driver distraction. According to the NHTSA report, 3,477 deaths and 391,000 injuries in 2015 resulted from distracted driving.

These statistics include injuries or deaths of drivers and their passengers, passengers in other vehicles, and nonoccupants, such as pedestrians and cyclists. To put these numbers in perspective, more people were killed in distracted driving crashes in 2015 than the 2,977 killed during the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Distracted driving, however, is only one piece of the total driving fatality picture. Of the traffic fatalities in 2016, 3,450 were

distraction-related crashes. This total is more than the 803 that were the result of drowsy driving. But it is less than the 10,497 fatalities resulting from drunk driving, the 10,111 fatalities resulting from speeding, and the 10,428 fatalities resulting from not wearing seatbelts.

Another statistic which worries road safety advocates is that driving fatalities in all categories have increased since 2011. In 2016, 37,461 people were killed on America's roadways, up from 35,092 in 2015. These annual totals are similar to the size of the student body at a large university. Along with a surge in the use of electronics, such as smartphones, researchers credit this spike in fatalities to lower gas prices and an increased number of jobs. When prices are low and people have more money, they drive more, creating the opportunity for crashes.

A 2015 study of teen drivers by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, however, found that distraction may play a higher role in crashes than estimated in national statistics. According to the study, slightly more than half of the crashes for teen drivers were the result of driver distraction. "Potentially distracting behaviors in general, and cell phone use in particular, were much more prevalent in the current study than in official statistics based on police reports," the report suggested.¹¹

Many safe driving advocates, including Jennifer Smith of Stopdistractions.org, understand the challenges of collecting accurate crash statistics. "Honestly, I think the real number of fatalities due to cell phones is at least three times the federal figure," Smith said in an interview with *Insurance Journal*.¹² According to Smith, one reason most distracted driving crashes go unreported is because it's so difficult for law enforcement officials to catch drivers in the act. "We all know what's going on, but we don't have a breathalyzer for a phone," Smith said.¹³

RECOGNIZING SIGNS OF TROUBLE

How often do you do each of these activities while you drive?

- Change channels on the radio
- Put on makeup
- Check appearance in vanity mirror
- Reach for an object
- Talk on a handheld cell phone
- Look at GPS map or directions
- Take a photo
- Sing along exuberantly with a song
- Have a conversation with a teen passenger
- Drive with young children or pets in the vehicle

Ways to Avoid Distracted Driving

- Place cell phone in an inaccessible place while driving
- Turn the phone off or put it in safe-driving mode
- Pull over or park in a safe location to make important phone calls or send text messages
- Designate a passenger to manage navigation, music selection, and cell phone communications
- Enter address into GPS and preview the route before leaving for the destination
- Secure all objects and food being transported
- Eat, drink, and take care of personal grooming before leaving or after arriving
- Follow local distracted driving and novice driver laws

ORGANIZATIONS TO CONTACT

End Distracted Driving (Casey Feldman Foundation)

www.endddd.org

Joel Feldman founded this organization after his daughter was killed by a distracted driver. The website is a project of the foundation and provides distracted driving resources from across the internet.

Hang Up and Drive (Jacy and Steve Good)

www.hangupanddrive.com

Founded by distracted driving victim Jacy Good and her husband Steve, Hang Up and Drive promotes safe driving for students and adults.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)

www.nhtsa.gov

The NHTSA conducts crash tests and investigates vehicle defects. The agency collects national traffic data and provides safety education to the public.

National Safety Council's Survivor Advocate Network

www.nsc.org/act/Pages/nsc-survivor-advocate-network.aspx

The NSC provides support to crash victims and their families through the Survivor Advocate Network. The network helps people affected by a crash to share their stories and connect with other survivors. It also supports victims when they speak with the media and policy makers to encourage future change.

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