ADVOCATES FOR HIGHWAY & AUTO SAFETY

Distracted Driving

In 2019, 3,142 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), a nearly ten-percent increase from 2018. This accounts for 8.7 percent of fatalities on U.S. roads in 2019.[i] In 2018, there were an estimated 400,000 people injured in distraction-affected crashes, the most recent year for which data is available.[ii] Moreover, crashes in which at least one driver was identified as being distracted imposed an economic cost of $40 billion in 2010.[iii]

The true impact of distracted driving remains unclear due to issues with the underreporting of crashes involving distraction, including differences in police crash report coding and database limitations.[iv] It is clear from an increasing body of safety research, studies and data that the use of electronic devices for telecommunications (such as mobile phones and text messaging), telematics and entertainment can readily distract drivers from the driving task.

Currently, 46 states (AL, AK, AR, AZ, CA, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, HI, ID, IL, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MS, NV, NH, NJ, NM, NY, NC, ND, OK, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VT, VA, WA, WV, WI, and WY) and the District of Columbia have a primary enforcement law banning text messaging for all drivers.[v] As technology on mobile devices has developed to include other electronic communications and uses such as video chatting, streaming, posting to social media and "apps," states have begun enhancing their texting ban laws by prohibiting these and other distracting electronic communications and uses while driving. Laws that prohibit hands free use must also ensure that distracting uses that divert a driver's attention to a screen, such as video streaming, recording and broadcasting, are also prohibited. In order to get people to pay attention while operating a vehicle and to adopt safer behaviors, education must be combined with strong laws and appropriate enforcement. This is the tried and true method to change behavior in order to improve safety.

Distracted Driving Facts

- Research has shown that because of the degree of cognitive distraction these devices cause, the behavior of drivers using mobile phones (whether hand-held or hands-free) is equivalent to the behavior of drivers at the threshold of the legal limit for alcohol (0.08 blood alcohol concentration).[vi]

- Crash risk increases dramatically – as much as four times higher – when a driver is using a mobile phone, with no significant safety difference between hand-held and hands-free phones observed in many studies.[vii]

- A 2009 study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that text messaging increased the risk of a safety-critical driving event (i.e., crashes, near-crashes, crash-relevant conflicts, and unintentional lane deviations) by 23.2 times.[viii]

- Eight percent of 15-19 year old drivers involved in a fatal crash were reported as distracted at the time of the crash. This age group has the largest proportion of drivers involved in fatal crashes who were distracted.[ix]

- In 2018 there were 2 trillion text and multimedia messages sent or received in the U.S.[x]

- Sending or receiving a text message causes the driver's eyes to be off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds. When driving 55 miles per hour, this is the equivalent of driving the entire length of a football field blind.[xi]

- The percentage of drivers holding cell phones to their ears while driving was just over three percent in 2018 according to NHTSA. This rate translates into just over 470,000 passenger vehicles driven by people using hand-held cell phones at a typical daylight moment in 2018.[xii]

- According to the NHTSA, the percentage of drivers visibly manipulating hand-held devices while driving increased by 250 percent between 2009 and 2018.[xiii]

- A 2016 survey conducted by State Farm found that:
  - Accessing the internet, reading and updating social media networks on a cell phone while driving more than doubled from 2009 to 2016.
  - Additionally about 10% of those surveyed in 2016 were also playing games on a cell phone while driving.[xiv]

- NHTSA's most recent survey found when compared to prior surveys that twice as many people reported cell phone use – whether talking or texting – when they were involved in a crash or near crash. The survey also indicated a high level of support for laws banning the behavior, 92% of respondents supported state laws banning texting or emailing while driving.[xv]

- In addition to all-driver texting ban and graduated driver license (GDL) cell phone ban laws, universal hand held ban laws may help to support enforcement of distracted driving laws whether actual or perceived.[xvi]

Advanced Vehicle Safety Technology: Proven and available safety technology must be required in all new vehicles, with a minimum performance standard, to prevent and mitigate common crash causes. When a safety feature is mass produced, costs for the systems are reduced and help to ensure they are within the reach of new car buyers. Minimum performance standards ensure that the technology offers at least a certain level of safety regardless of manufacturer.

Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS): Available proven collision avoidance systems have the capability to prevent and mitigate crashes caused by numerous behavioral issues such as distraction, impairment, fatigue, speeding and reckless driving. The technology includes automatic emergency braking (AEB), lane departure warning (LDW), blind spot detection (BSD), rear AEB and rear cross-traffic alert.

- The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) has found that:
  - AEB can decrease front-to-rear crashes with injuries by 56 percent;
  - LDW can reduce single-vehicle, sideswipe and head-on injury crashes by over 20 percent;
  - BSD can diminish injury crashes from lane change by nearly 25 percent;
  - Rear AEB can reduce backing crashes by 78 percent when combined with rearview camera and parking sensors; and,
  - Rear cross-traffic alert can reduce backing crashes by 22 percent.[xvii]

- In 2017, IIHS reported on the on-road effectiveness of FCW and AEB systems concluding that "[a]lmost 1 million U.S. police reported crashes in 2014 and more than 400,000 injuries in such crashes could have been prevented if all vehicles were equipped with FCW and AEB that perform similarly as systems did for study vehicles."[xviii]

- The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has identified the potential benefits of FCW/AEB, noting that "there were an estimated 1,994,000 crashes, 884,000 injuries, and 4,738 deaths that could have been potentially prevented or mitigated by FCW or AEB systems in 2016."[xix]

- The European New Car Assessment Program (NCAP) has started evaluating driver monitoring systems which can help "mitigate the very significant problems of driver distraction and impairment through alcohol, fatigue, etc."[xx] in its rating program

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[iv] Traffic Safety Facts: Distracted Driving 2018, April 2020, NHTSA, DOT HS 812 926.

[v] Distracted Driving: Cellphone use laws by state, November 2020, Insurance Institute for Highway and Auto Safety (IIHS), at https://www.iihs.org/topics/distracted-driving/cellphone-use-laws

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[xi] Blueprint for Ending Distracted Driving, NHTSA, June 2012, DOT HS 811 629, available at https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.dot.gov/files/811629.pdf

[xii] Traffic Safety Facts Research Note: Driver Electronic Device Use in 2018, Oct. 2019, NHTSA, DOT HS 812 818, available at https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812818

[xiii] Traffic Safety Facts Research Note: Driver Electronic Device Use in 2018, Oct. 2019, NHTSA, DOT HS 812 818.

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