ADVOCATES FOR HIGHWAY & AUTO SAFETY

Distracted Driving

The Issue:

Distracted driving is a major contributor to motor vehicle crashes, deaths and injuries on U.S. roads.[1] The use of electronic devices for communications (such as text messaging and video calls) and entertainment (such as apps and video streaming) can readily distract drivers from the driving task as found by safety research, studies and data. The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) includes "Distracted Driving" as one of seven specific safety issues that need further action in its "Highway" focus area of advocacy.[2]

The Impact:

- In 2024, 3,208 people were killed in crashes involving a distracted driver, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), accounting for 8% of all crash fatalities. Nonoccupants (pedestrians, bicyclists, and others) accounted for 20% (639) of distraction-affected fatalities in 2024. An estimated 315,167 people were injured in distraction-affected crashes in 2024.[3]
- Crashes in which at least one driver was identified as being distracted imposed an economic cost of $98.2 billion in 2019.[4] Adjusted for inflation only, that amounts to $126.9 billion in 2026 dollars.[5] In 2023, distracted driving crashes cost employers nearly $16 billion.[6] Adjusted for inflation only, that amounts to $17 billion in 2026 dollars.[7]
- The true impact of distracted driving remains unclear due to issues with the underreporting of crashes involving driver distraction, including differences in police crash report coding and database limitations.[8]
- According to an opinion poll commissioned by Advocates and conducted by ENGINE Insights in December 2024, 83% of respondents were "very" or "extremely" concerned with distracted driving caused by talking on cell phones, texting or using other mobile devices.[9]

The Facts:

- In 2024, over 2.2 trillion text and multimedia messages were sent or received in the U.S. Mobile wireless data traffic has risen dramatically over the last decade, from 3.2 trillion megabytes in 2013 to 132.5 trillion in 2024.[10]
- Research has shown that because of the degree of cognitive distraction these devices cause, the behavior of drivers using mobile phones (whether handheld or hands-free) is equivalent to the behavior of drivers at the threshold of the legal limit for alcohol in most states (0.08% blood alcohol concentration).[11]

- Crash risk increases dramatically–as much as four times higher–when a driver is using a mobile phone, with no significant safety difference between handheld and hands-free phones observed in many studies.[12]
- 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 (mph), this is the equivalent of driving the entire length of a football field blind.[13]
- Screen interaction by drivers fell by 8.6% in 2024. While this is a welcome drop, the 2024 figure is still 8.4% higher than 2020.[14]
- According to NHTSA, the percentage of drivers visibly manipulating handheld devices while driving increased by 104% between 2015 and 2024.[15]
- The percentage of drivers holding cell phones to their ears while driving was 1.9 in 2024 according to NHTSA. This rate translates into just over 230,000 passenger vehicles driven by people using handheld cell phones at a typical daylight moment in 2024.[16]
- The findings of three surveys confirm the prevalence of device use while driving:
    - A February 2022 survey commissioned by State Farm found that among licensed drivers:[17]
        - 55% "always" or "often" read or send text messages while driving.
        - 51% "always" or "often" hold the phone while talking.
        - 49% "always" or "often" interact with cell phone apps.
    - A March 2022 survey commissioned by Advocates and Selective Insurance Group found:[18]
        - 70% of licensed drivers have used a mobile device while driving for personal reasons in the last 90 days.
        - 86% of those whose jobs require them to drive at least sometimes report using a mobile device while driving for work purposes in the last 90 days.
        - 84% of drivers ages 18-34 used a mobile device while driving, a number that rises to 87% for drivers ages 35-44.
        - Nearly one in three Americans (31%) have either been in or know someone who has been in a crash that occurred while a driver was using a mobile device.
        - More than half of Americans have seen people driving while distracted by a mobile device in the past two weeks (56%).
        - When asked about strategies to effectively reduce distracted driving or its impacts, 58% indicated advanced safety technologies and 50% affirmed comprehensive state laws.
    - A March 2022 survey commissioned by Nationwide Insurance found:[19]
        - 34% of drivers believe it is very safe to hold your phone while driving. This finding was most pronounced among Gen Z and Millennials (39%).
        - Half of those surveyed (51%) had held a cell phone to talk, text or use an app while driving, despite 66% saying that such behavior is dangerous.

A 2026 survey by Nationwide Insurance found:[20]

- 24% of consumers "sometimes / often" "talk on a handheld mobile phone", and 17% admit to texting.
  - Parents of teens surveyed stated that 28% of teen drivers "sometimes / often" "talk on a handheld mobile phone" and 24% "text".
- Among commercial drivers surveyed, 50% identified "distracted driving on the road" as a situation which concerns them while driving for work; this was the second most common response, second only to "poor weather / road conditions".
- "1 in 5 consumers sometimes or often feel distracted behind the wheel – citing GPS / navigation systems, radio adjustments, and interacting with passengers as the main sources of distraction."
- "2 in 5 parents report their teen is often or sometimes distracted, with primary causes being radio adjustments and mobile phone use"
- "[A]bout 1 in 4 commercial drivers feel distracted behind the wheel – mostly due to the use of GPS / navigation systems or responding to work related calls."

- NHTSA's most recent survey on the issue 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.[21]

The Solutions: Laws, Technology and Road Safety Infrastructure

Comprehensive State Laws to Deter Distracted Driving

- A comprehensive approach including strong laws, appropriate and equitable enforcement, and effective education can deter distracted driving. In addition to all-driver texting bans and graduated driver licensing (GDL) cell phone bans, distracted driving laws should curb distracting viewing and manual use.
- 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 enhanced their texting ban laws by prohibiting these and other distracting electronic communications and uses while driving.
- A report on distracted driving laws by the Transportation Research Board (TRB) recommends that state laws should "be in effect at all times when the vehicle is traveling on public roads, this includes at stop lights and when temporarily slowed or stopped in traffic" and prohibit the use of "an electronic device to stream, record, or broadcast video. This includes when the device is used hands-free (mounted, affixed, or resting somewhere in the vehicle)."[22] The public supports legislation to discourage and reduce distracted driving:
  - In a survey commissioned by Advocates and Selective Insurance, 50% think comprehensive state laws can effectively reduce distracted driving. Views

on strategies to address distracted driving were consistent across political party lines.[23]
    - In a survey commissioned by Nationwide Insurance, 89% of consumers supported legislation to curb distracted driving, and 87% supported legislation to prohibit handheld cellphone use while driving.[24]
- Further, in-vehicle communication and infotainment systems and controls may also contribute to driver distraction.
    - A poll of 725 drivers in Australia and New Zealand found that 92% of drivers of vehicles with a touchscreen have felt distracted while using it. 57% of respondents in the survey stated that physical knobs and buttons were the easiest vehicle controls to use while driving.[25]
    - NHTSA should issue standards to prevent or limit driver distraction caused by use of these systems and nomadic devices. Existing NHTSA guidelines are non-binding and insufficient to address the issue.

Vehicle Safety Technology and Safety Standards Can Protect Vehicle Occupants and Other Road Users

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) must expeditiously advance minimum performance standards for vehicle safety technologies which can prevent or mitigate crashes and protect vehicle occupants and road users. These safety technologies should be standard, not optional, equipment in new vehicles. This action will achieve safety equity by both ensuring that the technology responds to and benefits all road users and that consumers buying new vehicles are not charged extra fees for the technology. Moreover, requiring equipment as standard can reduce the base cost of technology due to economies of scale.

Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS):

- According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, equipping all cars, pickup trucks, vans, minivans and SUVs with forward collision warning (FCW)/automatic emergency braking (AEB) which respond to pedestrians/bicyclists as well as vehicles could prevent 1.9 million crashes, nearly 900,000 injuries, and more than 4,700 deaths annually.[26]
- The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, Pub. L. 117-58) directs the U.S. DOT to issue Final Rules on minimum performance standards and requirements for ADAS technologies including AEB, FCW, lane departure warning (LDW) and lane keeping assist (LKA).[27]
    - In May 2024, U.S. DOT issued a Final Rule to require passenger vehicles be equipped with AEB that detect pedestrians.[28] NHTSA estimates that this action will save 362 lives and mitigate over 24,000 injuries annually. It is estimated to result in a yearly cost benefit of between $5.8-$7.2 billion.[29] In July 2023, DOT issued a NPRM to require heavy vehicles weighing over 10,000 pounds to be equipped with AEB.[30] A second NPRM may be issued in 2026.[31]
- A 2025 study found that AEB systems in modern vehicles (model years 2021-2023) reduced front-to-rear crashes by 52%.

    - The same study found that Pedestrian AEB systems in vehicles (model years 2015-2023) reduced single-vehicle frontal crashes with non-motorists by 9%.[32]

Driver Monitoring Systems:

- The European New Car Assessment Program (Euro NCAP) is evaluating driver monitoring systems (DMS) which can help "mitigate the very significant problems of driver distraction and impairment through alcohol, fatigue, etc."[33] in its rating program. The rating system includes evaluation of each system's ability to address visual distraction, phone use, fatigue and unresponsiveness.[34]
- Researchers studying automation complacency, a phenomenon which has been found to affect drivers in vehicles equipped with automated driving technology, recommend DMS as a countermeasure for driver disengagement and distraction.[35]
    - The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) has started rating vehicles on the performance of driving automation safeguards, including DMS. Of the first 14 vehicles tested, 11 were rated poor, two were marginal, and only one was rated acceptable.[36]
- A 2026 study by IIHS found that among nearly 3,500 owners of Subaru models equipped with the DriverFocus DMS, 87% said they drove with it on most or every time they drove," 70% said they would want the system again, and 64% agreed it made them a safer driver.[37]
- The NTSB has investigated crashes involving driver inattention and automated driving systems (ADS) and issued recommendations calling for safety standards and requirements for DMS in vehicles equipped with Level 2 automation. SAE International (formerly the Society of Automotive Engineers) defines Level 2 as vehicles equipped with technology that provides steering, braking and acceleration support to the driver. Level 2 features include lane centering combined with adaptive cruise control.[38]

Road Safety Infrastructure Improvements and the Safe System Approach

The Safe System Approach (SSA) assumes that humans will make mistakes and that we must anticipate this and make accommodations to account for limited human injury tolerances through five elements: Safe Vehicles, Safe Road Users, Safe Roads, Safe Speed and Post-Crash Care. By improving the design and operation of roadways to accommodate all road users safely, the SSA seeks to avoid conflicts between road users, especially for those outside the vehicle, and minimize impact forces when they do occur to prevent fatalities and serious injuries.[39]

Infrastructure improvements consistent with the SSA to limit conflicts include:

Curbing speed:

- This can be accomplished by reducing speed limits, employing automated enforcement to augment traditional enforcement, adding speed humps, using real-time speed feedback signs, performing road diets (narrowing roads) and installing roundabouts.

Prioritizing infrastructure to promote safety:

- This includes changes such as adding lighting and sight lines, leading intervals, pedestrian hybrid beacons, road narrowing (road diets), curb extensions, accessible sidewalks, rumble strips, protected intersections, separated bike lanes, and road separations which consider all users.

Localities can advance these and other infrastructure improvements systemically by requiring their adoption as appropriate in all road design and maintenance projects.

The next surface transportation reauthorization must continue to support SSA improvements including expanded funding for safety infrastructure upgrades, permit use of certain federal funds for automated enforcement and intelligent speed assistance (ISA) programs, set safety standards for proven vehicle safety technologies and meaningfully address vulnerable road user safety, among necessary safety priorities.

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