ON TODAY'S ROADS

The Power of Education

8 Tips for a Safer Road

Local Survey found 26% of drivers were distracted.

1,060 people are injured in crashes that involve a distracted driver each day.

Research Shows: headset cell phone use is not any safer than the use of portable phones.
Distracted Driving: the Here and the Now

The road has many obstacles—potholes, deer, other drivers—but the biggest obstacle drivers face may be themselves. Take a guess at how many people are on their phones or other electronic devices right now. Of that number, 660,000 of them are driving. This isn’t how many people drive while on their cell phones in a month or even a day—it’s how many people drive while on their cell-phones at any given moment. While this statistic may not seem alarming at first, studies show that cell phones and many other distractions increase the risk of a crash by 300% (“What”). Clearly, distracted driving is a problem.

So what exactly is distracted driving? The United States government defines it as “any activity that could divert a person’s attention away from the primary task of driving.” Distractions occur in three distinctive ways: visually (taking your eyes off the road), manually (taking your hands off the wheel), and cognitively (taking your mind off driving). Texting is a particularly dangerous distraction: it combines all three of these distractions, making it particularly dangerous. For this reason, most people assume that this definition is limited to answering phone calls or texting, but the truth is that crashes are caused by a variety of distractions: It doesn’t matter if the driver is changing the radio or drinking coffee. Here’s what the United States government includes as distractions: “texting, using a cellphone or smartphone, eating and drinking, talking to passengers, grooming, reading (including maps), using a navigation system, watching a video, and adjusting a radio, CD player, or MP3 player” (“What”).

The problem is as clear as it is devastating: 421,000 people were injured last year due to distracted driving, and the National Safety Council estimates that at least 1.6 million crashes each year involve drivers using cellphones. Yet people still think that distracted driving is acceptable, assuming that the statistics don’t apply to them, teens especially—nearly half of all U.S. high school students aged 16 years or older text or email while driving. But teens are not the only culprits of distracted driving. At any given moment, 10% of drivers are distracted by their phones. However, this percentage only includes cell phone usage and does not include the other traits that the government defines as distracted driving, which have been just as responsible for 80% of all crashes.

Many drivers are under the impression that “hands-free” technology, such as Bluetooth, is safer than using a hand-held device. Current research has shown, however, that headset cell phone use is not any safer than the use of portable phones (“What”). Why? While the manual distraction is gone, the cognitive distraction of having a hands-free phone conversation is still the same. And as such, hands-free phones cause drivers to miss the important visual and audio cues that would ordinarily help them avoid a crash.

From texting on the phone to scarfing down the morning’s breakfast, drivers across the nation often find themselves caught up in activities that detract from their focus of the road. More than 1,060 people are injured in crashes that involve a distracted driver each day, but we can only reduce this number by reducing the number of people who engage in these risky behaviors. By educating drivers, especially teens, on the risks of driving distracted, we can make the road a safer place.
The Power of Education

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.
— Nelson Mandela

Many people's fears of cars begin with the numerous car accidents that occur annually across the country. For teens and young adults especially, some action must be taken, as the leading cause of death for ages 15-24 is auto accidents. However, acting without proper knowledge about the issue is not worth acting at all, so education must come first for any hope of preventing teen driving accidents. In fact, Distraction.gov, the Official U.S. Government website for Distracted Driving, cites education as best way to fight distracted driving. Since education is not only necessary, but also effective, it is crucial that teenagers, those most at risk, understand how serious distracted driving really is.

Risk grows from failing to acknowledge it. Though most students have had their parents chide them about the dangers of not staying focused on the roads, teens try to justify multi-tasking while driving with potential caveats. “It’s acceptable if I’m at a red light,” “I just need to adjust the GPS quickly,” “I use a hands-free cell phone,” and even “I am a skilled driver; I can text safely” are all ways in which teenagers presume that distracted driving is acceptable. They either make the mistake of assuming the statistics don’t apply to them or are stressed in their lives and use that as an excuse to drive distractedly.

This problem grows in magnitude as young people grow increasingly confident in their ability to ‘multi-task,’ so they believe that texting while driving is not dangerous. Modern vehicles only worsen the issue by promoting features such as GPS and Bluetooth.

Most importantly, teens mitigate the dangers of their actions. Most teens don’t realize that, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, “[s]ending or receiving a text takes a driver’s eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds, the equivalent of driving the length of an entire football field at 55 mph” (“What”). According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, texting while driving kills 11 teens each day.

Problems like these can only be solved through education. Though laws exist, including prohibiting teens in the first six months of licensed driving to drive more than one passenger, they entail only secondary offenses, so most teenagers disregard them. Even if stronger legislation is passed, it must be supplemented with more education in order to be effective.

Fortunately, groups are already working to improve awareness about distracted driving. According to the Huffington Post, 47 states have taken steps to educate the public about the dangers of distracted driving, up from 37 states in 2010. Most states reported using social media—including Twitter, YouTube and Facebook—to get out the message. Programs like Ford Driving Skills for Life emphasize not only the dangers of cell phone use and texting, but also distractions like loud music and other teenage passengers.

Education and awareness for teenagers can come in many forms. A technique that is especially effective is a hands-on approach, something many police mentoring programs have been incorporating. It involves having kids drive go-karts while texting as they attempt to weave their way through cones. Another even more common approach is having a go-kart course, and students wear goggles to simulate driving under the influence.

Through hands-on programs may be difficult to coordinate or costly, education about distracted driving comes in many forms. Volunteer organizations, especially those in schools, can have a greater focusing on reducing distracted driving. Public schools can have required announcements or videos that detail the perils of distracted driving. It is especially important to start this education in early high school years, before students begin learning to drive. The small measures we take now, when repeated, will become a crucial step towards making roads safer in the future.

Don’t Become a Statistic
You’re More than a Number

It’s important that teenagers understand just how widespread the issue of distracted driving is—not only on the national level but also on the local level. Many Americans ignore the warnings around them because they refuse to believe that they are part of the problem. Broad, nationwide statistics only contribute to the mindset that it will always be “some other guy” that texts and crashes. As a result, many risky drivers believe that they will never become a statistic, but the surprising truth is that they already are. Everyone is 23 times more likely to crash if texting while driving (“Texting”). No one can assume that they have Lady Luck by their side. Still, some risk takers will never endure a catastrophe, but the only surefire way not to become a statistic is to be completely risk averse. Unfortunately, risk permeates roads not only on a national level but also in everyone’s daily lives.

We compared the number of distracted drivers to the number of focused drivers on a Wexford, PA intersection from 5 PM to 6 PM on a Saturday and discovered that out of 840 total drivers, 216 were distracted. Most of these distracted drivers were engaged in activities like talking and texting on cell phones, while others were caught up in conversations with other passengers, smoking, eating, or fiddling with navigational devices. Remember, even though only 26% of these drivers took away their focus of the road, they put 100% of the people on the road at risk of a crash.

Clearly, the problem exists in communities just as much as it does across the nation. When teenagers assume that statistics only apply to others, they fail to recognize that they are apart of the roadway menace. Distracted driving and all of its cascading effects apply to everybody—drivers and passengers alike. It is important that teenagers accept the truth that the best way to stop the large-scale problem is with individual small-scale fixes.
8 TIPS FOR A SAFER ROAD

1. **Power Down when You Rev Up**
   - Turn off your cellphones so you are not tempted to call or text, even at red lights.
   - If necessary, either pull over or ask a passenger to handle calls or texts.

2. **Less GPS, so You Don’t SOS**
   - Set destinations in your GPS before you begin driving.
   - Designate a passenger to be responsible for directions.
   - Pull over to check or adjust the GPS—don’t type and drive!

3. **Trash the Snacks**
   - Avoid eating or drinking while driving.
   - Make sure all food and drinks are secure.

4. **First Adjust or Bust**
   - Adjust seats, mirrors and temperature before you begin driving.
   - If you have passengers, designate these duties to them.

5. **Drop the Volume, not the Bass**
   - Use pre-programmed radio stations to easily adjust music, or ask a passenger to assist.
   - Never allow music to distract you from the road, especially by playing it too loudly.

6. **Eyes on the Street, not the Backseat**
   - Secure young children safely in their seats, and remind them of the importance of good car behavior.
   - Let your passengers know if they are distracting you.

7. **Obey the Golden Rule**
   - Don’t be a distracting passenger. You wouldn’t want a passenger to distract you if you were driving!
   - If you notice your driver is distracted, speak up!

8. **Two’s a Crowd; Three’s a Problem**
   - Watch the number of passengers that you drive with and never exceed the maximum capacity!
   - Don’t drive with too many passengers, especially if you are new to driving!

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**Works Cited**


