

# Background on: Distracted driving

## Auto

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## Overview

Activities that take drivers' attention off the road, including talking or texting on mobile devices, eating, conversing with passengers and other distractions, are a major safety threat.

The use of mobile phones and other electronic devices while driving has emerged as one of the leading causes of distracted driving related crashes. However, research shows that using a

cellphone when driving is just one of many types of distracted driving that may lead to crashes and near crashes.

## Scope of the problem

During the last five years ending in 2017, for which data is available from the National Highway Safety Administration (NHTSA), there were about 3,030 distracted driving crashes a year, accounting for about 9 percent of all fatal crashes. These crashes killed about 3,285 people each year over the same five years.

Economic losses from distracted driving could total \$46 billion a year. NHTSA released a [study](#) in May 2014 which focused on behavioral factors that contributed to 32,999 highway fatalities and 3.9 million injuries in the U.S. in 2010. The study, "The Economic and Society Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2010," found that those crashes cost \$277 billion in economic losses and \$594 billion in societal harm, for a total of \$871 billion that year. A breakdown of the figures for economic losses show crashes involving distracted driving accounted for 17 percent (\$46 billion).

**Cellphone use** is one of the distractions cited by NHTSA as a factor in fatal crashes. Over the last five years of reporting, an average of about 420 crashes a year involved the use of cellphones, accounting for 14 percent of all distraction-affected crashes. Cellphone-distracted crashes accounted for only 1 percent of all fatal crashes. About 450 people a year died in cellphone-distracted fatal crashes.

**Drowsiness** as a distraction caused more than 79,000 motor vehicle crashes each year on average over the last five years of reporting, resulting in 824 deaths, according to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) [report](#). A 2010 AAA Traffic Safety Foundation survey found that one in four drivers have struggled to stay awake while driving. An estimated 17 percent of fatal crashes, 13 percent of crashes resulting in hospitalization and 7 percent of all crashes requiring a tow, involve a drowsy driver, according to the AAA. Driver fatigue is a significant concern regarding operators of large trucks. In 2010 fatigue was a factor in 34 percent of fatal collisions involving drivers of large trucks, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

## State and Federal Initiatives

- In 2001 New York passed the first law banning hand-held cellphone use while driving.
- According to the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#), as of May 2020, talking on a hand-held cellphone while driving is banned in 25 states and the District of Columbia (Laws in Idaho, Indiana and South Dakota become effective July 1, 2020; Virginia's law becomes effective on January 1, 2021; Arizona will issue warnings until 2021 when it will issue tickets). Almost all of the laws have "primary enforcement" provisions, meaning a motorist may be ticketed for using a hand-held cellphone while driving without any other traffic offense taking

place.

- In 2011 the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recommended that all states prohibit drivers from using cellphones, the first federal agency to call for a complete ban on telephone conversations from behind the wheel. Although the NTSB has no enforcement authority, as the federal government's leading advocate for safety its recommendations are influential in Congress and the White House.
- Almost every state and the District of Columbia has banned the practice of texting with a cellphone while driving. Most of these laws have primary enforcement provisions.

## Key Studies

The following is a summary of some key research on the issue of distracted driving.

- **Distracted Driving:** According to [data analyzed](#) by Erie Insurance from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System at the U.S. Department of Transportation and released in April 2018, “generally distracted” or “lost in thought” was the number-one distraction involved in fatal crashes. Cell phone use was the cause of distraction for 14 percent of drivers, and people outside the vehicle, objects or events (rubbernecking) was a distraction for 6 percent of drivers. Distractions from other vehicle occupants accounted for 5 percent of driver distractions and reaching for other devices such as navigation devices and headphones rounded out the top five distractions with 2 percent. Erie Insurance analysts studied more than 172,000 people killed in car crashes over the past five years and found that one in 10 were in crashes where at least one of the drivers was distracted. Analysts consulted with the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety for the study.
- The AAA [Traffic Safety Culture Index](#) found that most drivers (87.5 percent) believe that distracted driving has outpaced all other traffic-related issues as a growing safety concern. It was followed by traffic congestion at 74.5 percent and aggressive drivers at 68.1 percent. Risky/aggressive driving, drowsy driving, and impaired driving are also a growing concern. More than half of drivers (54.9 percent) believe that drugs pose a significantly bigger problem today than in the past three years; while about 43.4 percent believe that drunk driving is either a much bigger problem today or a somewhat bigger problem today than three years ago, according to the AAA's report. Most respondents supported required alcohol-ignition interlocks for drivers convicted of a DWI.
- The 2019 Travelers Risk Index, [Distracted Driving](#) poll found that 77 percent of drivers make or take calls when driving, and 44 percent text or email while driving. As a result, 31 percent of respondents reported that they nearly missed getting into a collision, and nine percent have actually gotten into a collision. Twenty-three percent of drivers use social media and 22 percent record videos or take photos. Other activities were even more prevalent—eight out of ten drivers say they eat or drink while driving and 30 percent admit to grooming while driving.

- **Cellphone use:** Virtually all drivers (96.8 percent) view texting or emailing while driving as a serious threat, according to the AAA [Traffic Safety Culture Index](#). However, in the past 30 days, 44.9 percent of drivers had read a text message or email while driving.
- Respondents to the 2018 Travelers Risk Index, [Distracted Driving](#) provided some insight as to why motorists use cellphones while driving in spite of being aware of the danger. Among people who said they respond to family- or friend-related calls, emails or texts while driving, 61 percent said they respond to these because there might be an emergency. Twenty-three percent said they are afraid of missing out on something. Also of note, although 85 percent of respondents said that driving while using personal technology is extremely risky, 25 percent of those who engage in distracted driving believed they could do so safely. Only 12 percent of respondents said they use auto reply and do not disturb functions on their phones in order to prevent distracted driving.
- A study sponsored by the AAA Foundation for Highway Safety published a [report](#) in January 2018 that found that a driver's visual or manual use of a cell phone while driving resulted in about double the incidence of crashes compared with driving without any observable distraction-type behaviors. The study, conducted by researchers at Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, included observations of 3,593 drivers whose driving was monitored using in-vehicle video and other data collection equipment for a period of several months between October 2010 and December 2013. Researchers noted that the cell phone use that was associated with the crashes was particularly texting but not limited to that task.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey](#), released in June 2016, shows that about 41.5 percent of high school students reported that they texted or emailed from behind the wheel at least once during the previous 30 days, about the same as the 2013 survey. The survey is conducted every two years, and 2013 was the first time the 13,000 participants were asked about texting and emailing while driving. The highest rate of texting or emailing while driving, 63.2 percent, was among teens in South Dakota. The lowest rate, 26.1 percent, was among teens in Maryland.
- **Early Studies:** Motorists who used cellphones while driving were four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves, according to a study of drivers in Perth, Australia, conducted by the IIHS. The results, published in July 2005, suggested that banning hand-held phone use will not necessarily improve safety if drivers simply switch to hand-free phones. The study found that injury crash risk didn't vary with type of phone.
- Many studies have shown that using hand-held cellphones while driving can constitute a hazardous distraction. However, the theory that hands-free sets are safer has been challenged by the findings of several studies. A study from researchers at the University of Utah, published in the summer 2006 issue of *Human Factors*, the quarterly journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society, concluded that talking on a cellphone while driving is as dangerous as driving drunk, even if the phone is a hands-free model. An earlier study by researchers at the university found that motorists who talked on hands-free cellphones were 18 percent slower in braking and took 17 percent longer to regain the speed they lost when

they braked.

- A September 2004 study from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) found that drivers using hand-free cellphones had to redial calls 40 percent of the time, compared with 18 percent for drivers using hand-held sets, suggesting that hands-free sets may provide drivers with a false sense of ease.
- A study released in April 2006 found that almost 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes involved some form of driver inattention within three seconds of the event. *The 100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study*, conducted by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute and the NHTSA, broke new ground. (Earlier research found that driver inattention was responsible for 25 to 30 percent of crashes.) This study found that the most common distraction is the use of cellphones, followed by drowsiness. However, cellphone use was far less likely to be the cause of a crash or near-miss than other distractions, according to the study. For example, while reaching for a moving object such as a falling cup increased the risk of a crash or near-crash by nine times, talking or listening on a hand-held cellphone only increased the risk by 1.3 times.
- **State Laws Banning Cellphone Use:** Studies focusing on hand-held cellphone bans for drivers have yielded conflicting findings. Highway Loss Data Institute (HLDI) studies found that cellphone bans don't reduce crashes, in contrast with a Consumer Reports National Research Center study that found that the laws were effective. One of the factors leading to the conflicting findings may be the way the studies were conducted.
- A HLDI [analysis](#) released in October 2014 found that although state bans on hand-held phone use by drivers have lowered phone use behind the wheel, they have not produced a similar drop in crashes. The study involved looking at the findings of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration programs conducted from April 2010 to April 2011 in Hartford, Connecticut, and Syracuse, New York, aimed at reducing talking or texting on hand-held phones. Both states ban hand-held phone use and texting. At the end of the program, researchers found that the number of drivers observed using a hand-held cellphone fell 57 percent in Hartford and 32 percent in Syracuse. HLDI analysts then compared collision claims in the counties where these cities are located—with the comparison counties where there were no NHTSA programs. The analysis found no corresponding reduction in crashes reported to insurers from the program counties relative to the comparison counties. HLDI provided possible reasons for the bans' lack of effect on accidents, including the possibility that drivers may have been distracted by something else or that drivers may have switched to hands-free calling and still may have been distracted by their conversations.
- The analysis confirmed some of the results of an earlier HLDI [study](#), released in September 2010, that found that texting bans may not reduce crash rates. The study looked at collision claims patterns in four states—California, Louisiana, Minnesota and Washington—before and after text bans went into effect. Collisions went up slightly in all the states, except Washington, where the change was statistically insignificant. The president of HLDI and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety said that the findings “call into question the way

policymakers are trying to address the problem of distracted driving crashes. They're focusing on a single manifestation of distracted driving and banning it. This ignores the endless sources of distraction and relies on banning one source or another to solve the whole problem."

- A [survey](#) conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center published in June 2013 found that state laws that ban the use of a handheld cellphones or texting while driving in many states were effective. The December 2012 survey of 1,003 people found that 71 percent of respondents had stopped or cut back on texting, talking on a handheld phone or using a smartphone while driving in the previous year. Over 50 percent of them said they were influenced to change their behavior because of state laws, up from 44 percent in a survey conducted in 2011. The survey also found that about 25 percent of drivers were unsure of their own state's laws.

## Employer and Manufacturer Liability

Although only a handful of high-profile cases have gone to court, employers are still concerned that they might be held liable for accidents caused by their employees while driving and conducting work-related conversations on cellphones.

Under the doctrine of vicarious liability, employers may be held legally accountable for the negligent acts of employees committed in the course of employment. Employers may also be found negligent if they fail to put in place a policy for the safe use of cellphones. In response, many companies have established cellphone [usage policies](#) which prohibit all use of handheld and hands-free cell phones while driving.

In an article published in the June 2003 edition of the North Dakota Law Review, attorney Jordan Michael proposed a theory of cellphone manufacturer liability for auto accidents if they fail to warn users of the dangers of driving and talking on the phone at the same time. More recently, phone manufacturers and service providers have been facing the prospect of liability for not equipping mobile devices with features which could prevent the occurrence of distracted driving.

## Charts and Graphs

### Fatal Crashes Involving Distracted Drivers, 2018

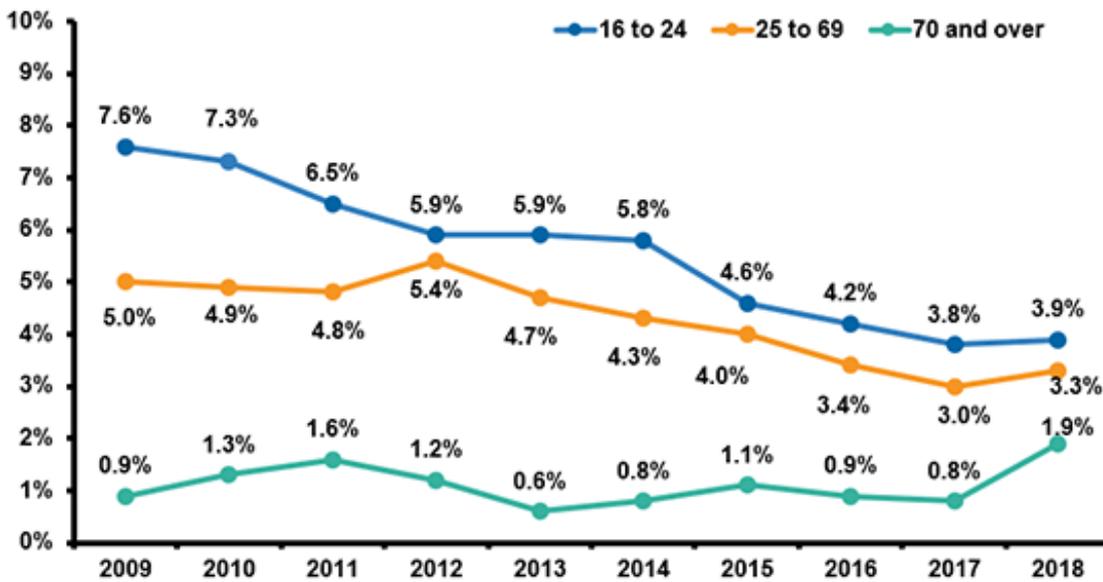
	Crashes	Drivers	Fatalities
<b>Total fatal crashes</b>	<b>33,564</b>	<b>51,490</b>	<b>36,560</b>
<b>Distraction-affected fatal crashes</b>			
Number of distraction-affected fatal crashes	2,628	2,688	2,841

Percent of total fatal crashes	8%	5%	8%
<b>Cellphone in use in distraction-affected fatal crashes</b>			
Number of cellphone distraction-affected fatal crashes	349	354	385
Percent of fatal distraction-affected crashes	13%	13%	14%

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

[View Archived Tables](#)

## Driver Handheld Cellphone Use By Age, 2009-2018 (1)



(1) Percent of all drivers using handheld cellphones.

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

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## Additional resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#)

- [The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#)

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