Distracted Driving

Indicators of Child and Youth Well-Being
Distracted driving poses a serious and potentially deadly risk to young people. In 2013, 10 percent of all drivers younger than 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported to have been distracted while driving. Among all drivers, inattention is the leading factor in most crashes and near-crashes.

Importance

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens, accounting for more than one in three deaths in this age group. For every mile driven, teen drivers ages 16-19 are three times more likely than older drivers to crash.

Distracted driving occurs when the driver engages in any activity that may distract them from the primary task of driving, such as eating and drinking, listening to music, using a navigation device, or using a cell phone. The age group with the greatest proportion of distracted drivers are those under 20. According to official reports, in 2013, driver distraction was involved in 10 percent of all fatal crashes for this group, a higher percentage than that for all other age groups. However, a recent study of in-car video footage found that potentially distracting behavior was a factor in 58 percent of major crashes for this age group; teenagers were using a cell phone in twelve percent of such collisions.

Reaching for a moving object increases the risk of a crash or near-crash by nine times, drowsiness by four times, looking at an external object by four times, reading by three times, dialing a cell phone by nearly three times, and talking or listening on a hand-held device by 1.3 times. For teen drivers, the most common distraction is using a cell phone. One study showed that using a cell phone while driving, whether hand-held or hands-free, delays a driver's reactions as much as does having a blood alcohol level at the legal limit of .08 percent. Text messaging is associated with the highest risk among all cell-phone-related tasks observed among drivers.

Another common source of distraction for teen drivers is riding with peers. The presence of teen passengers increases the crash risk of teen drivers when no older adult is present. The risk increases with the number of teen passengers. A recent study of 16- and 17-year-old drivers showed that having just a single passenger younger than 21 (and no older passengers was associated with a 44 percent increase in the driver's risk of being killed in a crash; having two such passengers doubled the risk, and having three or more quadrupled it. On the other hand, having at least one passenger who was 35 or older was associated with a 62 percent decrease in the risk for fatality among teens of this age.
Drowsiness is also an important factor in driver distraction. Research shows that many teens get inadequate sleep.\textsuperscript{10} Daydreaming or dealing with strong emotions are also forms of cognitive distraction experienced by many teens.

**Trends**

In 2013, 41 percent of high-schoolers who had driven reported emailing or texting while driving a car in the past 30 days. (Appendix 2) Looking at another measure, on any given day in 2014, an average of six percent of drivers, ages 16 to 24, used a hand-held cell phone while driving. This is a decrease from a peak of ten percent in 2005. (Appendix 1)

According to a 2009 survey, 43 percent of teens, ages 16-17, report they have ever talked on a cell phone while driving, and 26 percent have texted while driving. Sixty-four percent reported riding in a car when the driver was texting, and 48 percent said they had been with a driver who used a cell phone in a way that put themselves or others in danger.\textsuperscript{11} (Figure 1)

![Figure 1](https://www.childtrends.org/data/2010/03/safety/wi.png)
Differences by Gender

Male and female teens are equally likely to report texting behind the wheel. Thirty-four percent of both males and females, ages 16-17, report they have text-messaged while driving.\textsuperscript{12}

Differences by Race/Hispanic Origin\textsuperscript{13}

Among high-schoolers in 2013, whites were the most likely to report texting or emailing while driving in the past 30 days, at 46 percent, while blacks were the least likely to do so (29 percent). Asian students (40 percent) were not significantly different from whites or Hispanics (36 percent) on this measure, although Hispanic students were less likely than whites to report these distractions. (Appendix 2)

State and Local Estimates

None available.

International Estimates

None available.

National Goals

None.
What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator

Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) is a program that eases young drivers into full responsibility. A model three-stage program includes specific components and restrictions that introduce progressively more challenging driving experiences gradually to beginning drivers. Some components, such as limiting the number of passengers, having a licensed adult required in the vehicle at all times, and prohibitions on use of portable electronic communication and entertainment devices, address distracted driving. The most comprehensive GDL programs are associated with reductions of about 20 percent in 16-year-old drivers’ fatal crash involvement rates. More information is available here:


Teen drivers whose parents set rules and monitor their teens’ driving behavior are more likely to follow safe driving practices, including avoiding using a cell phone while driving.14


Related Indicators

- Drunk Driving: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=drunk-driving
- Motor Vehicle Deaths: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=motor-vehicle-deaths
- Seat Belt Use: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=seat-belt-use
- Time Spent in Sleep: www.childtrends.org/?indicators=time-spent-in-sleep

Definition

Distracted driving is any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving, or to increase the risk of crashing.15

Data Sources


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**Raw Data Sources**

Survey conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project.


### Appendix 1 - Percentage of Young Drivers, Ages 16-24, who Were Visibly Distracted by Technology Use: 2004-2014

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driver Using Hand-Held Cell Phone</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver Speaking With Visible Headsets on</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driver Visibly Manipulating Hand-Held Devices</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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## Appendix 2 - Percentage of High School Students who Reported Texting or E-mailing while Driving in the past 30 days, among Those who Drove: 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>All Students</th>
<th>41.4</th>
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### Gender

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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>41.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40.9</td>
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### Race/Ethnicity

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>45.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic Black</td>
<td>29.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>36.0</td>
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### Grade

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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>16.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>26.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>49.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>60.3</td>
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Note: Estimates do not include youth who dropped out of school and therefore may not reflect total national values. Students from California, Oregon, Washington, and Minnesota, Colorado, Iowa, Indiana, and Pennsylvania were not included in the 2013 survey.

Endnotes


13 Hispanics can be any race. Estimates for whites, blacks, and Asians in this report do not include Hispanics.
