

Background to Driver Distraction / Mobile Phones & Driving

While there is ever increasing focus on driver distraction, and its role in increasing collision risk for road users, the evidence is relatively strong that mobile use by drivers, whether hand free or hand held, is major contributory factor in increasing distraction that can lead to increased collision risk.

The mobile phone distracts drivers in two ways: it causes physical distraction and cognitive distraction. Physical distraction occurs when drivers have to simultaneously operate their mobile phone (i.e. reach, dial, hold) and operate their vehicle. Cognitive distraction occurs when a driver has to divert part of his/her attention from driving to a telephone conversation or other smart phone function. However, the ability to divide one's attention between two simultaneous tasks is limited.

Probably the most famous and most frequently cited epidemiological study about the risks of mobile phone use while driving is the study of Redelmeier and Tibshirani (Redelmeier & Tibshirani, 1997). The researchers found that the risk of a collision when using a mobile phone was four times higher than the risk when a mobile telephone was not being used. The results of the study also indicate that hands-free phones offer no safety advantage over handheld units. Similar findings were achieved in other epidemiological studies (Laberge-Nadau, et al., 2003), (McEvoy, et al., 2005).

Texting while driving has a significant negative impact on performance. This negative impact appears to exceed the impact of talking on a phone while driving. (Drews, Yazdani, Godfrey, & Cooper, 2009). These findings were supported in another study which found that retrieving, and in particular, sending text messages has a detrimental effect on a number of safety critical driving measures. When text messaging, drivers' ability to maintain their lateral position on the road and to detect and respond appropriately to traffic signs was significantly reduced. In addition, drivers spent up to 400% more time with their eyes off the road when text messaging than when not texting messaging, (Hosking, Young, & Regan, 2006).

Key Stats

1. Driver distraction is thought to play a role in 20-30% of all road collisions. Driver distraction can include a range of in-vehicle distractions including eating, drinking, reaching for objects, dealing with children in the back seat etc but mobile phone use is thought to be a particularly significant distracting factor.
2. A distraction can be one that's defined as physical, cognitive or visual
3. At the end of June 2016 there were almost 4.9 million mobile phone subscriptions in Ireland, with 79.5% of these using a smartphone. (ComReg, 2016 2nd Quarter
4. While it is clear that mobile phones enhance business communications and increase personal convenience; use of mobile phones while driving has become a road safety concern.
5. An RSA/Behaviour and Attitudes poll of over 1,000 drivers in November and December 2015 revealed that two in five drivers (41%) admit to talking on a hands free phone when driving 'at least sometimes', with one in ten saying they talk on a

hand-held phone when driving. The claimed rate of texting and driving and checking apps and driving is lower with 6% and 3% respectively admitting to this 'at least sometimes'. At a total level, this means that almost half of drivers surveyed (46%) admit to using the mobile phone when driving in some way, be it hands-free, hand-held, texting or checking apps. These rates are higher among male drivers than female drivers. Talking on a hand held mobile is higher among drivers aged 17-34 years while texting and checking apps is higher among drivers aged 17-49 years.

6. Based on an RSA observational study in 2015 of 14,230 drivers it is estimated that at any given moment during the day, 3% of Irish drivers are using a mobile phone while driving. The gender breakdown of those observed using a mobile phone while driving is the same for both males and females at 3%. This represents a reduction in the numbers based on the 2014 study (8%) but is broadly similar to results obtained in previous year's studies (2013 and 2012 where 5% and 4% of drivers were observed using a phone while driving).
7. In 2014, 1.6 per cent of all drivers in England and Scotland were observed using a hand-held mobile phone whilst driving. (DfT Statistical Release 25 February 2015)
8. Mobile phone use while driving can negatively affect driving performance. The results of a number of studies strongly suggest that using a mobile phone while driving can increase the risk of being involved in a road collision by up to four times.
9. When text messaging, drivers' ability to maintain their lateral position on the road and to detect and respond appropriately to traffic signs was significantly reduced. In addition, drivers spent up to 400% more time with their eyes off the road when text messaging.
10. Using a hands free kit provides no safety benefit. When it comes to mobile phones and driving the advice is – it won't kill you to put it away, .

Additional Research Findings

- 9% of drivers say they were involved in a collision in the last 5 years. Of these, 19% said the collision was due to losing concentration, rising to 30% for drivers under 34 years. Of the other behaviours that resulted in a collision, 18% said it was due to distraction and 4% said it was due to exceeding a safe speed.*
- 41% of drivers say that they talk on a hands free phone when driving 'at least sometimes' (sometimes/often/always)*. A total of 13% say they do so always.
- One in ten say they talk on a hand-held phone when driving 'at least sometimes' (sometimes/often/always)*. Of all drivers 3% say they do so always or often.
- The claimed rate of texting and driving is lower with 4% saying they 'sometimes' text and drive, 8% rarely, and the majority (86%) saying they NEVER text and drive. *

- The claimed rate of checking apps and driving is lower with 2% saying they 'sometimes' text and drive and the majority (91%) saying they NEVER check apps while driving. *
- Talking on a hands-free device is perceived to be much safer (51% say it is safe) relative to talking on a handheld device (3% say it is safe) or texting or checking apps (1% say these are safe). Note much of the international research indicates that talking on a hands free is not as safe as widely believed, due to the cognitive distraction involved, and there is evidence to suggest that it is in fact as distracting as using a hand held device. The World Health Organisation report on 'Mobile phone use: a growing problem of driver distraction' states that phone conversations on a mobile are more distracting than conversations with passengers in the vehicle because: 'passengers are more aware of the driving situation and road environment, and can moderate, adapt or delay the conversations during challenging driving circumstances, a phenomenon that does not occur during phone conversations.'
- When asked about the acceptability of using mobile phones while driving under certain conditions, 16% felt it was acceptable to do so in slow moving traffic and 30% felt it was acceptable to do so when stopped at traffic lights; a further 35% felt it was acceptable in the case of a family emergency.
- Previous studies have indicated that the threat of getting penalty points as a result of using your mobile phone when driving is an effective deterrent. In this current study drivers were asked if they were aware the penalty points had increased for using a mobile phone. Of those who were aware 28% said they use a hand held mobile phone less when driving since the increase in penalty points; 27% say they text less while driving and 25% say they check apps such as email and social media less often. One in every two drivers (49%) felt it was likely that someone using a mobile phone while driving would get caught by the police.