

The Dangers of Texting While Driving

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Introduction

Texting while driving is one of the most dangerous forms of distracted driving. A driver who reads or writes a message must look away from the road, remove at least one hand from the steering wheel, and direct mental attention toward the phone. These actions reduce the driver's ability to identify hazards, maintain lane position, control speed, and respond quickly when traffic conditions change.

Some drivers continue to text because they believe they can divide their attention safely. A message may seem urgent, and checking it may appear to require only a few seconds. However, road conditions can change during those seconds. A vehicle ahead may stop suddenly, a pedestrian may enter a crossing, or another driver may change lanes without warning. By the time the distracted driver looks up, there may be insufficient time or distance to prevent a collision.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that distraction-related crashes killed 3,208 people and injured approximately 315,167 people in the United States in 2024. These numbers include several types of distraction, but mobile phone use remains one of the most visible and preventable sources of driver inattention (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], 2026).

The actual impact of distracted driving may be considerably greater than official crash records indicate. Unlike alcohol use, mobile phone distraction does not always leave clear physical evidence after a collision. Drivers may not admit that they were texting, witnesses may not have seen the phone, and investigating officers may be unable to establish exactly what the driver was doing before impact.

Texting while driving therefore requires a coordinated response involving legislation, visible enforcement, education, workplace policies, parental guidance, and technology that limits phone use behind the wheel. Strong penalties are justified when distracted driving causes serious harm, but punishment alone will not eliminate the behavior. Drivers must understand that no routine message, email, or social media notification is worth risking a human life.

What Is Distracted Driving

Distracted driving is any activity that diverts attention away from the safe operation of a motor vehicle. It includes texting, making calls, adjusting navigation systems, eating, applying makeup, reaching for objects, interacting with passengers, and changing music.

Driver distraction is generally divided into three categories. Visual distraction occurs when the driver looks away from the road. Manual distraction occurs when the driver removes one or both hands from the steering wheel. Cognitive distraction occurs when the driver's thoughts are directed away from driving.

Texting is especially dangerous because it frequently involves all three forms at the same time. The driver looks at the phone, uses a hand to hold or operate it, and thinks about the message rather than the traffic environment. The United States Department of Transportation has described texting as particularly serious because it creates a combination of visual, manual, and cognitive distraction.

A driver may believe that glancing at a message is harmless because the vehicle continues moving in a straight line. However, safe driving is not a passive activity. It requires constant observation of mirrors, traffic signs, road conditions, nearby vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists, and possible escape routes. Removing attention from any of these responsibilities increases the likelihood that a hazard will be detected too late.

Why Drivers Continue to Text

Many people recognize that texting while driving is dangerous but continue to do it. This contradiction is partly explained by overconfidence. Drivers may believe that they are more skilled than the average person or that their personal phone use is controlled and brief.

Past success can strengthen this false confidence. A person may have read messages while driving many times without experiencing a collision. Instead of recognizing that they were fortunate, the driver may conclude that the behavior is safe. This reasoning ignores the fact that a serious crash may occur during the first incident, after years of distracted driving, or not at all. Risky behavior does not become safe merely because its consequences have not yet occurred.

Social expectations also encourage immediate responses. Friends, relatives, employers, and customers may expect messages to be answered quickly. Some workers receive calls, directions, or assignments while driving and may fear that delaying a response will appear unprofessional. Smartphone notifications are designed to capture attention, making it difficult for some users to ignore an incoming message.

Drivers may also misunderstand the nature of multitasking. Human attention does not function like a computer that performs several complex tasks simultaneously without losing accuracy. When people attempt to text and drive, their attention shifts rapidly between the phone and the roadway. Each shift creates a period in which important information may not be noticed or fully processed.

The solution is not simply to advise drivers to exercise greater confidence or skill. Drivers must accept that texting creates limitations that experience cannot entirely overcome. Even a highly experienced driver cannot respond to a hazard that was not seen in time.

How Texting Affects Driving Performance

Scientific evidence consistently shows that texting interferes with several parts of driving performance. Caird et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of 28 experimental studies involving 977 participants. The researchers found that reading and writing text messages adversely affected visual attention, hazard detection, reaction time, lane position, speed control, following distance, and collision risk. Writing messages produced particularly substantial impairment.

Texting can cause a vehicle to drift within or outside its lane because the driver is not continuously monitoring road position. It can also lead to inconsistent speed. Some distracted drivers slow considerably while using a phone, believing that reduced speed makes the behavior safe. Although slowing may reduce some risk, unexpectedly slow or inconsistent driving can create new hazards for surrounding traffic.

Reaction time is especially important. A driver must first see a hazard, understand its significance, decide how to respond, and then brake or steer. Texting can delay the earliest stages of this process. By the time the driver notices the danger, the opportunity to avoid it may have passed.

Irwin et al. (2015) found that texting during simulated driving negatively affected lane control and reaction time. Their findings demonstrate that distraction influences both the driver's ability to maintain ordinary control and the ability to respond to unexpected events.

Mobile phone conversations can also create cognitive distraction. Strayer et al. (2003) found that hands-free conversations reduced drivers' responses to vehicles braking ahead and interfered with their memory for objects in the driving environment. Drivers may look directly at the road without mentally processing what is in front of them, a condition sometimes described as inattentional blindness.

This evidence is important because it challenges the belief that hands-free technology eliminates distraction. Voice-controlled messaging may reduce the need to hold or look at a phone, but it still requires the driver to compose, review, and respond to information.

He et al. (2014) found that speech-based text entry was less disruptive than handheld typing but still impaired driving compared with driving without a messaging task. Hands-free communication should therefore be considered less dangerous than manual texting, not entirely safe.

The Human Cost of Distracted Driving

Statistics about distracted driving represent real people rather than abstract numbers. A fatal crash may leave children without parents, parents without children, or families caring for permanently injured relatives. Survivors may experience chronic pain, disability, emotional trauma, loss of

employment, and significant medical expenses.

The driver who sent or read the message may also suffer lasting consequences. Even when criminal charges are not filed, causing a preventable death or serious injury can produce guilt, grief, anxiety, depression, and damage to personal relationships.

Passengers face risks despite having no control over the driver's decision. Pedestrians, motorcyclists, cyclists, road workers, and emergency responders are especially vulnerable because they lack the physical protection provided by an enclosed vehicle.

The consequences may occur in less time than it takes to type a sentence. At highway speed, a vehicle travels a considerable distance every second. A driver who looks down for several seconds is effectively moving through traffic without fully observing the road.

The argument that a message will take "only a moment" therefore fails to recognize the speed at which vehicles travel and hazards develop. A brief distraction can be long enough to cross into another lane, miss a traffic signal, or strike a person who has entered the roadway.

The Economic and Social Costs

Distracted-driving crashes also impose financial costs on society. These costs include emergency response, hospital treatment, rehabilitation, insurance claims, vehicle repairs, legal proceedings, lost productivity, traffic delays, and long-term care for people with severe disabilities.

NHTSA used a broader method to estimate the total role of distraction in crashes during 2019. That analysis estimated that distraction was involved in 29% of all crashes, contributing to approximately 10,546 deaths, 1.3 million nonfatal injuries, and \$98.2 billion in economic costs. The estimate was substantially higher than figures based only on crashes officially coded by police as distraction-related, demonstrating the problem of underreporting (NHTSA, 2023).

Some of these losses are paid privately through insurance premiums and personal expenses. Others are shared through public healthcare systems, disability programs, emergency services, court costs, and publicly maintained roads.

Businesses may also lose experienced employees or face liability when workers text while driving as part of their employment. A company that pressures employees to respond while on the road may contribute to an unsafe organizational culture. Employers should make it clear that no work-related call or message requires an immediate response from a moving vehicle.

Texting While Driving Laws

Traffic laws in the United States are primarily established and enforced by individual states. The federal government regulates particular groups, such as commercial motor vehicle drivers, and supports national safety programs, but there is no single federal traffic law that establishes identical penalties for every private driver.

The latest Governors Highway Safety Association compilation reports that 49 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the U.S. Virgin Islands prohibit text messaging by all drivers. It also reports that 33 states and the District of Columbia prohibit all drivers from using handheld cellphones. Most texting bans allow primary enforcement, meaning that an officer may stop a driver for the phone violation without first observing another traffic offense (Governors Highway Safety Association [GHSA], 2025).

Penalties vary considerably among jurisdictions. They may include fines, penalty points, license consequences, increased insurance costs, or mandatory education. Repeat offenses generally attract stronger consequences than a first violation.

When distracted driving causes a crash, the driver may face additional charges under laws governing reckless driving, negligent injury, vehicular homicide, or similar offenses. The applicable charge depends on state law, the driver's conduct, the level of harm, and the available evidence.

The original claim that all texting offenses may lead to imprisonment or a fine as high as \$10,000 should not be applied nationally. A basic texting violation is usually treated differently from distracted conduct that causes death or serious injury. Accurate discussion must distinguish ordinary traffic citations from criminal offenses involving severe consequences.

Federal regulations prohibit drivers of commercial motor vehicles from texting while driving. A commercial driver may face a civil penalty of up to \$2,750 and disqualification for repeated violations. Employers that require or permit prohibited phone use may also face substantial penalties (Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration [FMCSA], 2013).

These federal rules are justified by the size and weight of commercial vehicles. A momentary distraction involving a large truck or passenger bus can produce catastrophic consequences for numerous road users.

Why Narrow Texting Bans Are Difficult to Enforce

Texting laws can be difficult to enforce because officers must determine what the driver was doing with the phone. From outside the vehicle, it may be unclear whether a person was typing a message, selecting music, viewing a map, dialing a number, or performing another task.

Drivers may attempt to conceal phones below the window line, making the behavior harder to observe. Some enforcement agencies use elevated vehicles, motorcycles, unmarked vehicles, or officers positioned at intersections to identify violations. These methods can improve observation but require staffing and resources.

Narrow laws that prohibit texting but permit other handheld phone activities create an additional problem. A stopped driver may claim that the phone was being used for an activity that the statute does not clearly prohibit.

For this reason, broader laws prohibiting drivers from holding or manually operating an electronic device are generally easier to understand and enforce. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that comprehensive laws addressing the handling of electronic devices appear more promising than laws limited to calling or texting.

Research comparing state laws has found that broad prohibitions on holding a phone were associated with reductions in crash rates in Oregon and Washington. The same pattern was not found in California, suggesting that the precise wording and enforceability of a law influence its effectiveness (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety [IIHS], 2022).

The Importance of Visible Enforcement

A law has limited preventive value when drivers believe that violations are unlikely to be detected. Effective enforcement should increase the perceived likelihood of receiving a citation rather than relying only on severe penalties after a crash.

High-visibility enforcement combines increased police activity with public communication. Drivers are informed that officers will be watching for prohibited phone use during a particular campaign. The purpose is not simply to issue as many citations as possible but to discourage the behavior before a crash occurs.

Research supported by the United States Department of Transportation found that strong laws combined with highly visible enforcement could reduce texting and handheld phone use behind the wheel.

Enforcement must nevertheless be carried out fairly. Traffic laws should not become a basis for arbitrary stops or unequal treatment. Agencies should establish clear procedures, provide officer training, publish enforcement data, and evaluate whether stops and citations are distributed fairly.

Public trust matters because road users are more likely to accept enforcement when they understand the rule, believe it is applied consistently, and recognize its safety purpose.

Education and Public Awareness

Laws communicate that texting while driving is unacceptable, but education explains why the behavior is dangerous. Awareness programs should move beyond slogans and show how distraction affects vision, reaction time, and decision-making.

Driver education programs should include practical demonstrations and evidence rather than simply instructing learners not to use a phone. Young drivers may benefit from simulator exercises that show how quickly lane control and reaction time deteriorate during texting.

Parents also influence young drivers. A parent who texts while driving sends a stronger message through behavior than through verbal warnings. Families can establish a rule that phones remain stored or placed in a driving mode whenever a vehicle is moving.

Passengers should also be encouraged to speak up. A passenger can offer to answer a call, send a message, adjust navigation, or ask the driver to pull over. Remaining silent may allow a dangerous situation to continue.

Public campaigns must avoid presenting distraction only as a problem among teenagers. Young and inexperienced drivers face substantial risks, but adults of all ages use phones behind the wheel. The responsibility to drive attentively applies to every road user.

Technology as Part of the Solution

Smartphones can contribute to distraction, but they can also help prevent it. Most modern phones offer driving modes that silence notifications, send automatic replies, or restrict access to selected applications while the user is moving.

Drivers should activate these features before beginning a journey. The phone can also be placed in a bag, glove compartment, back seat, or another location that is difficult to reach. Physical distance reduces the temptation to check a notification.

Navigation and music should be prepared before the vehicle moves. When a change is necessary, the driver should ask a passenger for assistance or stop in a safe location.

Employers can use phone-blocking technology and written policies to reduce occupational distracted driving. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health advises employers to prohibit phone use while driving for work, require employees to stop safely before communicating, and consider technology that restricts phone use in moving vehicles (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

Vehicle-based driver-monitoring systems may also help identify distraction. Cameras and sensors can

detect when a driver repeatedly looks away from the road or removes hands from the steering wheel. However, these systems should be treated as backup protections rather than permission to use a phone.

Responding to Common Arguments

One common argument is that an urgent message may require an immediate response. Genuine emergencies do occur, but responding from a moving vehicle can create an additional emergency. The driver should pull over safely before reading or sending the message.

Another argument is that experienced drivers can manage texting more effectively. Experience may improve vehicle control, but it does not remove the visual, manual, and cognitive demands of messaging. An experienced driver who is not looking at the road remains unable to respond to an unseen hazard.

Some drivers believe that voice-controlled messaging is completely safe. Although it reduces manual and visual demands, research indicates that speech-based messaging can still interfere with attention and driving performance (He et al., 2014).

Others object to cellphone laws as unnecessary government interference. Individual freedom is important, but driving occurs in a shared public environment. A driver's decision affects passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, and occupants of other vehicles. Society already regulates speeding, intoxicated driving, vehicle safety, and seat belt use because dangerous driving choices can harm people who did not consent to the risk.

Recommended Measures

The most effective response to texting while driving combines personal responsibility with public policy. Drivers should activate driving mode, store phones out of reach, prepare navigation before departure, and stop safely before communicating.

States should adopt clear laws that prohibit holding or manually operating mobile devices while driving. Broad laws are easier for drivers to understand and for officers to enforce than statutes that require proof that a person was specifically typing a text message.

Enforcement campaigns should be visible, consistent, and fairly administered. Penalties should increase for repeat violations and for conduct that causes injury or death. However, fines should be accompanied by education so that drivers understand the reason for the law.

Schools and licensing agencies should teach the scientific effects of distraction. Parents should model attentive driving, while passengers should feel comfortable challenging unsafe behavior.

Employers should establish policies stating that workers are not expected to answer calls, texts, or emails while driving. Managers must follow the same rule because employees are unlikely to respect a policy that leaders ignore.

Technology companies and automobile manufacturers should continue developing default driving modes, notification controls, and reliable driver-monitoring systems. These measures will not replace responsible behavior, but they can reduce temptation and provide additional protection.

Conclusion

Texting while driving is not a harmless personal habit. It is a dangerous behavior that affects the driver, passengers, pedestrians, cyclists, other motorists, families, businesses, and public institutions.

The scientific evidence shows that texting reduces visual attention, delays reactions, weakens lane control, and increases the likelihood of safety-critical errors. The danger exists because texting requires the driver to divide visual, manual, and cognitive attention between two activities that each require concentration.

Thousands of people are killed and hundreds of thousands are injured in distraction-related crashes each year. The complete burden is probably higher than official police reports suggest because phone distraction is difficult to identify after a collision.

State texting bans represent important progress, but narrow laws and inconsistent enforcement limit their effectiveness. Comprehensive handheld-device laws, visible enforcement, education, employer policies, and phone-blocking technology provide a stronger response.

Serious penalties are appropriate when distracted drivers kill or injure other people. Nevertheless, the primary goal should be prevention rather than punishment after irreversible harm has occurred.

Drivers do not need to abandon communication. They need to delay it until the vehicle is safely parked. A text message can wait, but a driver may have only a fraction of a second to avoid a collision. No notification, email, or social media post is more important than the lives of people sharing the road.

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