Priority Level Two: Distracted Drivers

Distracted driving[1] is any non-driving activity that diverts a driver's attention from the primary task of driving and increases the risk of crashing. Safety researchers recognize three main types of driver distractions: visual, manual, and cognitive. Distractions that take a driver's eyes off the road are visual. Manual distractions take a driver's hands off the steering wheel, and those that take a driver's mind off the road are cognitive. Driver distractions include activities such as cell phone use, texting while driving, eating, drinking, talking with passengers, and using in-vehicle technologies and portable electronic devices. Some non-driving activities, such as texting, are particularly dangerous because they involve all three types of distractions.

Between 2006 and 2008, distracted driving in Washington State was a factor in 1,060 serious injuries and 451 fatalities, or 12.7% of all serious injuries and 26.1% of all fatalities, according to state collision data. Distracted driving deaths peaked on weekends and weekday afternoons. Forty percent of all distracted driving fatalities occurred during the weekend; between 6 pm Friday and 6 am Monday. Another one-quarter (26.6%) occurred on weekdays, Monday through Thursday between 12 pm and 6 pm.

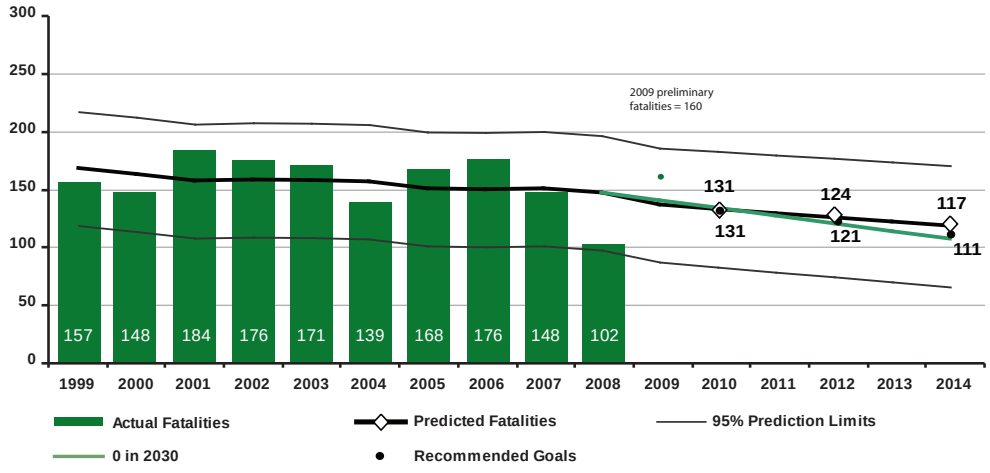
The true size of the distracted driving problem is unknown because collision data collected by crash investigators often under-reports driver distraction. In 2006, specific distraction items were added to Washington's Police Traffic Collision Report to better identify the types of distractions that contributed to crashes (see box on page 45). Nonetheless, to select any of the 13 distraction items on the collision report, either the officer or an involved party needs to witness the distraction, or else it must be self-reported by the driver.

In 2008, the number of fatalities involving distracted driving decreased while the number of serious injuries remained unchanged. The reason(s) for the decrease in fatalities has not been identified, and will be the subject of further analysis.

Distracted driving has received more attention in light of increased use of wireless communication devices and safety research on the risks associated with driving while talking or texting on a cell phone. In 2009, 85% of the total US population subscribed to a wireless device (Lenhart 2009). A 2008 national survey estimated that 11% of US drivers were using either hand-held or hands-free cell phones during daylight hours (NHTSA 2009). Researchers are in nearly-unanimous agreement that using a cell phone—hand-held or hands-free— while driving significantly degrades many skills essential to driving and increases crash risk (Caird and Scialfa 2005).

Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) conducted a two-year study monitoring driver behavior using

Fatalities Involving Distracted Drivers: Trends, Forecasts, and Goals



Source: Washington Traffic Safety Commission - Fatality Analysis Recording System

[1] In the previous edition of Target Zero, distracted driving was combined with drowsy driving and ranked as Priority Three. These two safety issues have been separated with distracted driving elevated to Priority Two. Drowsy driving, which accounted for 4.5% of traffic fatalities, is now ranked as Priority Four.

video equipment (2009). Study results showed that drivers of cars and light trucks who dial a cell phone are 2.8 times more likely to have a crash or near-crash then non-distracted drivers. Drivers of heavy trucks who dial a cell phone are 5.9 times more likely to have a crash or near-crash than their non-distracted counterparts. Drivers of heavy trucks who text are 23.2 times more likely to have a crash or near crash than their non-distracted counterparts. An analysis of distracted driving research in the Journal of the American Medical Association JAMA showed that "young drivers who text spend up to 400% more time with their eyes off the road than drivers who do not text, have 6-fold greater odds of a collision, and in simulated driving have impaired lateral and forward vehicle control." (2010)

Reducing Distracted Driving Collisions

Using a hand-held wireless communications device or texting while operating a motor vehicle became a primary enforcement law in Washington effective June 10, 2010. Additionally, this primary law prohibits the holder of either an Intermediate Driver's License (IDL) or an instruction permit from operating a motor vehicle while using a wireless communication device except in the case of an emergency. Target Zero partners are currently working on a coordinated effort to publicize the law and educate the public on the dangers of driving while texting or talking on a phone.

Distracted driving regulations have also been strengthened at the national level. The USDOT now prohibits text messaging by commercial motor vehicle drivers, and federal employees are not allowed to text while driving.

In addition to tougher laws, Washington plans to decrease fatal and serious injury collisions involving distracted driving by increasing driver awareness of the risks associated with distracted driving. Roadway engineering solutions will also help, including adding centerline and shoulder rumble strips, a proven low-cost engineering strategy to alert inattentive drivers with noise and vibration when their vehicles deviate from the lane.

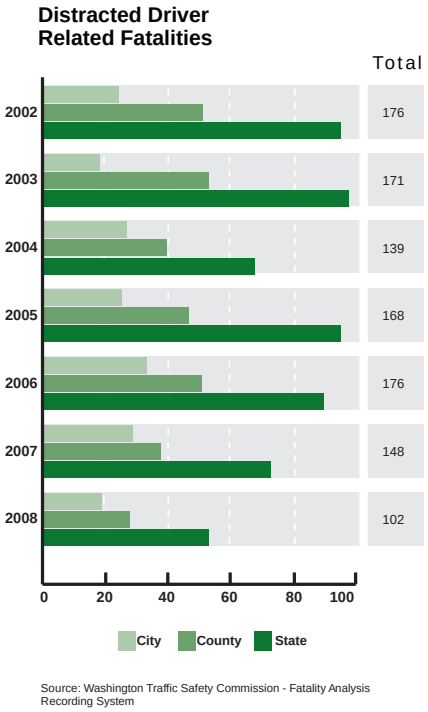
Gathering Distracted Driver Data

When preparing reports on collisions, law enforcement officers currently have a total of 44 possible items from which to identify the causes of a collision. The officer may select up to three different items for each driver. Of the 44 items, there are 13 different "distraction" items, for instance: driver operating handheld telecommunication device.

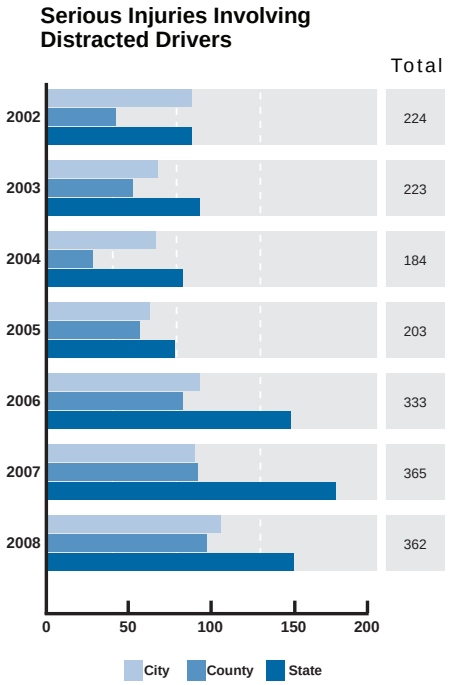
The collection of the 13 distraction items became effective January 1, 2006. In order to use one of the 13 distraction items, either the officer or any involved party needs to witness the situation, or the item must be "self-reported" by the driver. Because of this, it is very likely that the distraction items may be under-reported within the collision data repository.

In 2010, FARS will begin gathering more specific distracted driving information. Included will be such pre-crash data as, "[driver] talking or listening to cellular phone," "[driver] adjusting climate controls/radio, etc.," "cellular telephone present in vehicle," and "cellular phone in use in vehicle."

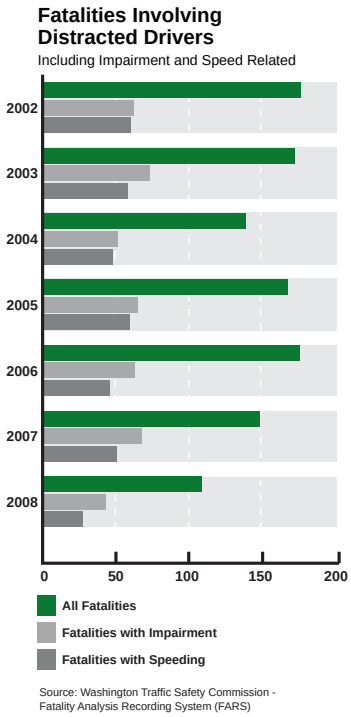
Priority Level Two: Distracted Drivers



Source: Washington Traffic Safety Commission - Fatality Analysis Recording System

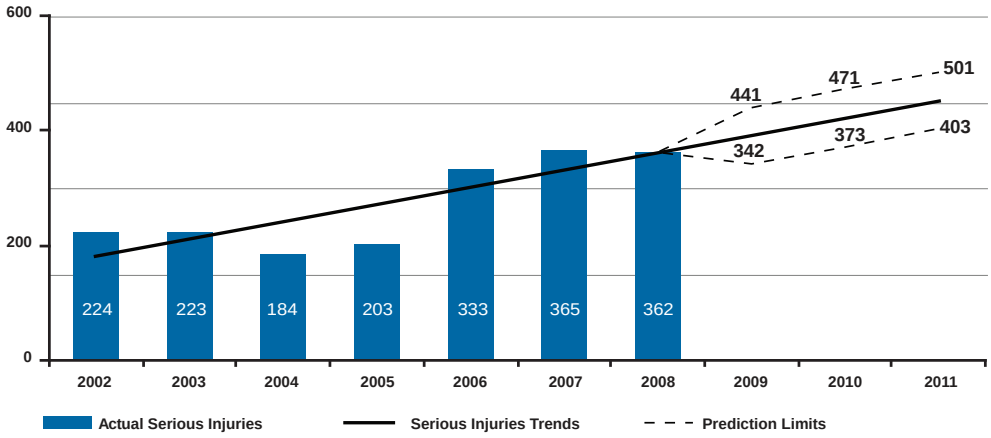


Source: WSDOT Collision Database



Source: Washington Traffic Safety Commission - Fatality Analysis Recording System (FARS)

Serious Injuries Involving Inattentive/Distracted Drivers: Trends and Forecasts



Source: WSDOT Collision Database

Priority Level Two: Distracted Drivers

2.3 Strategies to Reduce Collisions Involving Distracted Drivers	
2.3.A Gather data	2.3.A1 Analyze new distracted driver data being collected with the new Police Traffic Collision Report beginning in July 2006. (T)
2.3.B Use roadway engineering to reduce the consequences of distracted driving	2.3.B1 Implement corridor safety model on high crash locations where data indicates a high incidence of distracted crashes. (P)
	2.3.B2 Implement a targeted shoulder rumble strip program. (P/T)
2.3.C Increase driver awareness of the risks of distracted driving and promote driver awareness	2.3.C1 Conduct statewide education combined with targeted enforcement. (T)
	2.3.C2 Utilize community traffic safety task forces to address distracted driver issues. (E)
2.3.D Enforce and strengthen laws and regulations aimed at reducing distracted driving	2.3.D1 Explore ways to develop and implement strategies to reduce deaths and serious injuries due to distracted driving. (E)