

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of November 13, 2017 – Statistics and Distracted Driving

With all the publicity that has saturated television, radio and even social networks about the dangers of cell phone use while driving, it seems that we are either not listening to the seriousness of these messages or just have that erroneous attitude of “it could not happen to me.”

Through a mere glance of statistics gathered by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), one would assume that the campaign of “texting while driving” has been quite effective. This is far from the truth. As it turns out, when a death due to distracted driving occurs, federal records do not record the event as such, but rather as just another line item on the annual toll: for last year that was 37,262.

Over the past two years, after decades of declining deaths on the road, U.S. traffic fatalities increased by 14.4 percent. In 2016 alone, more than 100 people died every day in or near vehicles in America. This is the first time the country has experienced this sobering number in a decade. Yet regulators, insist that they do not know why crash-related deaths are spiking. True, people are driving longer distances, but not significantly; total miles were up just 2.2 percent last year. And yes, there is evidence that we are speeding and drinking a little more, but not much more than usual. The conclusion: Experts say these upticks don’t explain the surge in road fatalities.

There are however, three big indications that insist these rising statistics are not merely arbitrary. First of all, as we all know, there has been a substantial increase in smartphone use by U.S. drivers as they drive. From 2014 to 2016, the share of Americans who owned an iPhone, Android phone, or something comparable, increased from 75 percent to 81 percent!

The second indication is the changing way in which Americans use their phones while they drive. These days, we’re pretty much done talking. Texting, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are the order of the day. These activities require far more attention than simply holding a gadget to our ear. By 2015, almost 70 percent of Americans were using their phones to share photos and follow news events via social media. In just two additional years, that figure has jumped to 80 percent.

Finally, the increase in fatalities has been largely among bicyclists, motorcyclists, and pedestrians; all of whom are easier to miss from the driver’s seat than an automobile - especially if you’re focusing on your phone rather than concentrating on the road. Last year, 5,987 pedestrians were killed by cars in the U.S., almost 1,100 more than in 2014; a 22 percent increase in just two years.

In more than half of 2015 fatal crashes, motorists were simply going straight down the road—no crossing traffic, rainstorms, or blowouts. Meanwhile, drivers involved in accidents increasingly mowed down things smaller than a car, such as pedestrians or cyclists; many of whom occupy the side of the road or the sidewalk next to it. Fatalities increased inordinately among motorcyclists (up 6.2 percent in 2016) and pedestrians (up 9 percent).

In NHTSA’s defense for not properly classifying accidents due to phone use, its conclusions is only as good as the data it gets from individual states; each of which has its own method for diagnosing and detailing the cause of a crash. Each state, in turn, relies on its various municipalities to compile



crash metrics; and there is a lack of consistency (from state-to-state and in each municipality) on how traffic statistics are calculated.

The data from each state is compiled from accident reports filed by local police, most of which do not prompt officers to consider mobile phone distraction as an underlying cause. Only 11 states use reporting forms that contain a field for police to tick-off mobile-phone distraction, while 27 have a space to note distraction in general as a potential cause of the accident.

As an example of understanding how and why data can get skewed, we can take a look at Tennessee; a state that has one of the most thorough accident report forms in the country; a document that asks police to evaluate both distractions in general and mobile phones in particular. Of the 448 fatalities involving a phone in 2015 as reported by NHTSA, 84 occurred in Tennessee. That means, a state with 2 percent of the country's population accounted for 19 percent of its phone-related driving deaths: an unlikely assessment, suggesting that it really depends on how you ask the question.

Perhaps more telling are analyses of smartphone data by certain organizations that are designed to help insurers of commercial fleets for assessing safety risks. In a study conducted by one of these organizations, of 3 million people, it was found that drivers were using their mobile phone during 88 percent of their trips. This data does not include the use of hands-free technology, which is another form of distracted driving.

There are, by now, a myriad "technological nannies" that freeze smartphone activity. Most notably, a recent version of Apple's iOS operating system can be configured to keep a phone asleep when its owner is driving and to send an automated text response to incoming messages. However, the "Do Not Disturb" function can be overridden by the person trying to get in touch. More critically, safety advocates note that such systems require an opt-in from the same users who have difficulty ignoring their phones in the first place.

There is a quote that is attributed to British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli: "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics." It seems that our information regarding vehicular accidents and cell phone use, can be placed into this last category. This is illustrated from NHTSA's full 2015 dataset, where only 448 deaths were linked to mobile phones; that's just 1.4 percent of all traffic fatalities. By that measure, drunk driving is 23 times more deadly than using a phone while driving - even though studies have shown that both activities (when driving) constitute a similar level of impairment.

It seems that we are still in the phase of blind perception when it comes to distracted driving. One person explained it by using the "cocktail party example." To elaborate, "If you're at a cocktail party and say, 'I was so hammered the other day, and I got behind the wheel,' people will be outraged. But if you say the same thing about using a cell phone, it won't be a big deal. It is still acceptable, and that's the problem."

He that would govern others should first be the master of himself.

Philip Massinger (English Playwrite)

