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2021 SafeTREC Traffic Safety Fact Sheet: Distracted Driving

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Authors

Chen, Katherine L.

Tsai, Bor-Wen

Fortin, Garrett

et al.

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TRAFFIC SAFETY FACTS

Distracted Driving

—Katherine L. Chen, Bor-Wen Tsai, Garrett Fortin, and Jill F. Cooper—

INTRODUCTION

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines a distraction-affected crash as one where a driver was determined to be distracted at the time of the crash.

According to the National Safety Council, mobile devices are among the top distractions for drivers nationwide. Studies have found that talking on cell phones, both handheld and hands-free, increases crash risk by about four times relative to baseline driving. Built-in communication technologies, along with hands-free cell phone technologies, draw attention away from driving. The ability to multitask is a myth, as attention toggles from either driving to vehicle technologies. The longer time one pays attention to the technology, the less time attention is paid to the roadway environment.

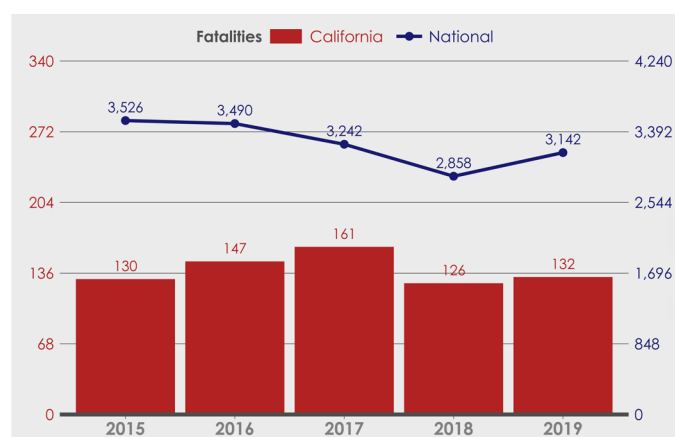
Historically, road safety efforts focused on changing human behaviors to prevent crashes. The Safe System approach reframes efforts to save lives by expecting crashes to happen and focusing attention on reducing the severity of injuries when a crash occurs. By understanding the nuances of distracted driving crashes, transportation professionals can better address every aspect of crash risks and implement multiple layers of protection to ensure that everyone traveling on California roadways will go safely. Analyses presented in the distracted driving program area are defined by a driver's inattention to driving due to some other activity. These analyses will focus exclusively on fatalities using the FARS data set as the SWITRS distracted driving data is limited to cell phone use.

KEY FINDINGS

NATIONAL DATA

- Nationally, 3,142 people were killed in distracted driving crashes in 2019, a 9.9 percent increase from 2,858 in 2018. Distracted driving deaths were 8.7 percent of all fatalities in 2019 (see Figure 1).
- The National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS) is the only probability-based survey on national driver electronic device use and is conducted by NHTSA. In 2018, NOPUS reported a decrease in the percentage of drivers observed speaking with visible headsets between 2018 (0.35 percent) and 2017 (0.45 percent). During this same time, the percentage of drivers holding cellphones to their ears increased from 2.9 percent in 2017 to 3.2 percent. NOPUS estimated that 9.7 percent of drivers were using either a handheld or hands-free phone at a typical daylight hour in 2018.
- In 2018, 8 percent of fatal crashes, 15 percent of injury crashes, and 14 percent of motor vehicle traffic crashes reported to the police were distraction-affected.

Figure 1: Distracted Driving Fatality Trends, Nationwide 2015-2019



Source: FARS 2015-2018, FARS ARF 2019

- In 2018, 8 percent of teen drivers aged 15 to 19 involved in fatal crashes were reported as distracted. Drivers aged 15 to 19 represent the largest proportion of reported distracted drivers at the time of a fatal crash.
- NHTSA reports that there were 506 non-vehicle occupants (pedestrians, bicyclists, etc.) fatally injured in distraction-affected crashes in 2018.

NATIONAL DATA*(continued)*

- The 2019 Traffic Safety Culture Index by the American Automobile Association (AAA) Foundation for Traffic Safety found:
 - The vast majority of drivers consider use of a cell phone while driving for typing (96.2 percent), reading (94.3 percent), and talking (79.7 percent) to be very or extremely dangerous. Conversely, a minority of drivers (22.5 percent) view the use of in-vehicle hands-free technology while driving to be very or extremely dangerous.
 - While over 76.0 percent of drivers support laws against holding and talking on a cellphone while driving, and about 86 percent support laws against texting while driving, 43.2 percent of drivers report having spoken on a hand-held cell-phone while driving in the last 30 days.
 - Drivers involved in at least one crash in the last two years are significantly more likely to have self-reported distracted driving.
- Teens aged 15-19 years old accounted for 7.0 percent of those who died in distraction-affected crashes in 2018.

CALIFORNIA DATA**State-level Analysis**

The figures in this section refer to passenger vehicle occupants fatally injured in a distracted driving crash in California in 2019. These numbers are the products of UCB SafeTREC analysis of the FARS ARF 2019 dataset.

KEY FINDINGS

- Distracted driving fatalities increased 4.8 percent in California from 2018 to 2019. There were 126 deaths in 2018 compared to 132 in 2019.
 - In 2021, the OTS sponsored a Traffic Safety Survey of public opinion on traffic safety issues. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey remained in an electronic survey format, as in the prior year.
 - Californians were asked about their top traffic safety concerns. "Distracted Driving because of texting" was the biggest safety concern for 74.3 percent of surveyed drivers. "Texting or Checking Phone While Driving" was reported as the most serious distraction by 69.7 percent of respondents.
 - More than half, 51.9 percent, of the respondents in 2021 report having been hit or nearly hit by another driver talking or texting on a cell phone.
- **Fatal Distracted Driving Crashes**
 - By number, the counties with the greatest number of fatal injuries in 2019 were concentrated in southern California in Kern, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego counties, along with Sacramento and Santa Clara counties (see Figure 5).
 - By rate, the highest fatal injuries in 2019 were in the small counties where one injury affects the rate significantly. Amador, Butte, Glenn, Lassen, Mono, San Benito, Sutter, and Tehama counties all had elevated rates.
 - Twenty-two of 58 counties recorded zero fatalities related to distracted driving in 2019.

CALIFORNIA DATA

(continued)

Figure 2: Time of Day and Day of Week for Distracted Driving Fatal Injury Victims, California, 2019

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	TOTAL
Midnight-3AM	4	0	0	1	0	2	5	12 [9.1%]
3-6AM	0	2	0	4	1	0	0	7 [5.3%]
6-9AM	3	3	4	2	4	1	1	18 [13.6%]
9AM-Noon	2	2	2	1	4	2	4	17 [12.9%]
Noon-3PM	3	2	3	1	3	7	5	24 [18.2%]
3-6PM	0	4	2	2	5	3	2	18 [13.6%]
6-9PM	2	1	2	2	8	2	1	18 [13.6%]
9PM-Midnight	3	3	2	2	2	2	4	18 [13.6%]
Unknown	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0 [0.0%]
TOTAL	17 [12.9%]	17 [12.9%]	15 [11.4%]	15 [11.4%]	27 [20.5%]	19 [14.4%]	22 [16.7%]	132 [100.0%]

FSI Num+% 0 1-2 3-4 5-8

Source: FARS ARF 2019

Time and Day of Distracted Driving Fatal Injuries

- Distracted driving fatalities in 2019 were most common on Fridays, with 20.5 percent of fatalities, followed by Sunday, with 16.7 percent, and Saturday, with 14.4 percent. Distracted driving fatalities occurred throughout the day, but were somewhat more common between noon and 3pm, with 18.2 percent of fatalities. The specific periods with the greatest number of fatalities were Friday from 3 pm to 9 pm, Saturday and Sunday from noon to 3 pm, and Sunday from midnight to 3 am (see Figure 2).

Fatal Distracted Driving Victim Demographics

- The age category with the greatest number of distracted driving fatalities was age 45 to 54, with 19.1 percent of distracted driving fatalities. The next most common age category of distracted driving fatalities was 55 to 64, with 17.6 percent of fatalities. About two-thirds, 64.9 percent, of distracted driving fatalities were male.
- For 23.5 percent of distracted driving fatalities, race was unknown. Of the victims with known race, 79.2 percent were white.

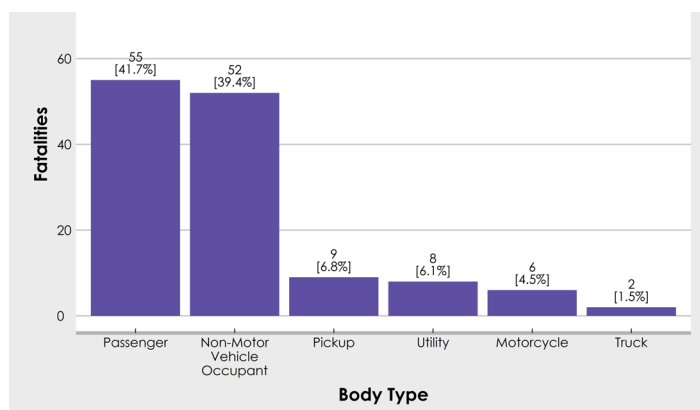
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Crash Location for Distracted Driving Fatal Injury Victims

- A majority of distracted driving fatalities occurred in urban areas at 71.2 percent while 28.8 percent occurred in rural areas. For comparison, about 17.1 percent of travel took place on rural roads in 2019.
- Most distracted driving fatalities occurred on non-interstate principal arterial roadways at 44.7 percent, followed by non-interstate minor arterials at 21.2 percent.

Figure 3: Vehicle Type for Distracted Driving Fatal Injury Victims, California, 2019



Source: FARS ARF 2019

Vehicle Type for Fatally Injured Victims of Distracted Driving Crashes

- Just under half of distracted driving fatalities were passengers at 41.7 percent. 39.4 percent were non-motor vehicle occupants, such as pedestrians and bicyclists (see Figure 3).

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COUNTY TABLE: DISTRACTED DRIVING

Figure 5: Distracted Driving Fatalities, by Number and Rate, 2019

County	Population	Fatalities	Fatalities per 100K Population
Alameda	1,668,965	3	0.18
Alpine	1,123	0	0.00
Amador	37,724	1	2.65
Butte	214,532	4	1.86
Calaveras	44,403	0	0.00
Colusa	22,045	0	0.00
Contra Costa	1,147,269	2	0.17
Del Norte	27,207	0	0.00
El Dorado	188,818	0	0.00
Fresno	1,018,437	6	0.59
Glenn	29,072	1	3.44
Humboldt	133,820	0	0.00
Imperial	188,962	0	0.00
Inyo	18,463	0	0.00
Kern	909,697	11	1.21
Kings	153,522	1	0.65
Lake	64,080	1	1.56
Lassen	28,972	1	3.45
Los Angeles	10,210,966	16	0.16
Madera	157,686	2	1.27
Marin	260,969	0	0.00
Mariposa	17,842	0	0.00
Mendocino	88,125	1	1.14
Merced	281,592	0	0.00
Modoc	9,458	0	0.00
Mono	13,585	1	7.36
Monterey	443,397	2	0.45
Napa	139,874	1	0.72
Nevada	97,808	0	0.00
Orange	3,195,197	1	0.03
Placer	394,626	0	0.00
Plumas	18,450	0	0.00
Riverside	2,428,464	10	0.41
Sacramento	1,548,760	10	0.65
San Benito	62,051	1	1.61
San Bernardino	2,176,150	11	0.50
San Diego	3,346,937	9	0.27
San Francisco	897,114	1	0.11
San Joaquin	767,935	6	0.78
San Luis Obispo	277,276	1	0.36
San Mateo	776,002	0	0.00
Santa Barbara	452,066	0	0.00
Santa Clara	1,960,932	7	0.36
Santa Cruz	272,185	3	1.10
Shasta	177,620	0	0.00
Sierra	3,127	0	0.00
Siskiyou	44,000	0	0.00
Solano	439,990	2	0.46
Sonoma	495,058	3	0.61
Stanislaus	554,212	3	0.54
Sutter	102,808	2	1.95
Tehama	65,163	3	4.60
Trinity	13,374	0	0.00
Tulare	477,731	2	0.42
Tuolumne	52,557	0	0.00
Ventura	844,213	1	0.12
Yolo	220,723	1	0.45
Yuba	78,061	1	1.28
Total	39,761,195	132	0.33

Source: FARS ARF 2019, California Department of Finance 2020

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