

Road safety factsheet: Driver distraction

May 2024

There has been much attention on driver distraction due to the use of mobile phones in vehicles, but increasingly research is also revealing the dangers of other forms of driver multi-tasking, and its contribution to road crashes.

Although this factsheet talks mainly about driver distraction, other road users including riders, cyclists, and even pedestrians can also be distracted from the dangers of the road around them.

What is distraction?

A driver is distracted when they pay attention to a second activity while driving. People cannot always safely multi-task in this way, especially if the second activity is time consuming or complex.

The second activity puts extra demands on the driver, which may reduce his or her driving standard. For example, it may cause the driver to become less observant or to make poor decisions about how to control the vehicle safely. This lower standard of driving means that a driver is more likely to fail to anticipate hazards and means collisions can occur due to the distraction.

In theory, there are as many potential causes of distraction as there are things to which drivers could pay attention. In reality, however, drivers tend to prioritise information so that they pay the most attention to information or activities needed for driving.

Distraction can be either driver initiated (where the driver starts carrying out a distracting activity) or non-driver initiated (the unpredictable actions of something or someone else).

Objects, events, or activities both inside and outside the vehicle can cause distraction. In-vehicle distractions can be caused by technology, or by other sources inside the vehicle such as passengers. External distractions may be when a driver concentrates on unimportant events or objects, or when another person does something unusual.

An American Study¹ looked at the percentage of drivers who engaged in potentially distracting activities during three hours of driving, and the duration of these activities when their vehicles were moving.

Potential distraction	per cent of subjects	per cent of total driving time
Talking on a mobile phone	30.0	
Answering a mobile phone	15.7	1.30
Dialling on a mobile phone	27.1	
Eating, drinking, spilling	71.4	1.45
Preparing to eat or drink	58.6	3.16
Manipulating music/audio controls	91.4	1.35
Smoking (includes lighting and extinguishing)	7.1	1.55
Reading or writing	40.0	0.67
Grooming	45.7	0.28
Baby distracting	8.6	0.38
Child distracting	12.9	0.29
Adult distracting	22.9	0.27
Conversing	77.1	15.32
Reaching, leaning, etc.	97.1	
Manipulating vehicle controls	100.0	3.78
Other internal distraction	67.1	
External distraction	85.7	1.62

Collision statistics

There have been a range of estimations about the number of collisions that are caused by, or contributed to, by driver distraction. It is hard to make an accurate estimate as crash databases are generally constructed from reports following a collision and it is probable that not every driver admits to being distracted or inattentive at the time of the crash.

Data published by the Department for Transport suggests that in 2022, driver distractions or impairment contributed to 12,246 road traffic collisions².

One of the largest studies of driver behaviour conducted is the 100-Car Naturalistic Study³ in the USA, which recorded the activities of 241 drivers over the course of 12 –13 months in order to build up a picture of how drivers behaved in cars.

¹ AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (2001) 'The Role of Driver Distraction in Traffic Crashes' <https://www.forces-nl.org/download/distraction.pdf>: Accessed December 2023

² DfT (2023) 'Table RAS0701: Collisions, casualties and road user types: Great Britain, 2022' <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/reported-road-accidents-vehicles-and-casualties-tables-for-great-britain#factors-contributing-to-collisions-and-casualties-ras07>: Accessed December 2023

³ Neale et al. (undated) 'An Overview of the 100-car Naturalistic Study and Findings' <https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.gov/files/100carmain.pdf>: Accessed 10 May 2022

Around 42,300 hours of driving data was collected, and in this time the vehicles covered around two million miles. At the end of the study, researchers also had 15 police-reported and 67 non-police reported collisions to study, as well as 761 near-crashes and 8,395 'incidents'.

It was found that 78 per cent of the collisions and 65 per cent of near crashes had one form of inattention or distraction as a contributing factor – including inattention due to fatigue.

Another study⁴, which examined film footage of drivers in their vehicles, found that all drivers partook in at least one distracting activity, and that altogether, drivers spent 14.5 per cent of the time that the vehicle was in motion involved in a distracting activity. They engaged in a distracting activity once every six minutes on average.

In a study of US collision data⁵, 8.3 per cent of drivers were distracted at the time of their collision. However, the driver's attention status was unknown in 35.9 per cent of collisions and so there may be under reporting.

Types of driver distraction

There are four types of driver distraction^{6,7}

- Visual
- Cognitive
- Biomechanical
- Auditory

An activity can create multiple types of distraction – for example, using a handheld mobile phone while driving creates a biomechanical, auditory and cognitive distraction.

Visual distraction occurs when a driver sees objects or events, and this impairs the driver's observations of the road environment.

The way that a driver observes the area around the vehicle depends on how complex it is, and in complex environments, drivers can find it more difficult to identify the main hazards.

In undemanding situations, a driver's attention tends to wander towards objects or scenery that are not part of the driving task. Estimates of how much time drivers spend doing this varies from between 20 per cent and 50 per cent⁸.

Cognitive distraction occurs when a driver is thinking about something not related to driving the vehicle.

⁴ McEvoy et al. (2006) The Impact of Driver Distraction on Road Safety: Results From a Representative Study in Two Australian States, *Injury Prevention*, 12(4): 242-247.

⁵ Stutts et al. (2001) The Role of Driver Distraction in Crashes: an Analysis of 1995-1999 Crashworthiness Data System Data, *Annu Proc Assoc Adv Automot Med*, 45: 287-301.

⁶ Young et al. (2003) 'Driver Distraction a Review of the Literature', Monash University

⁷ Ranney et al. (2000) 'NHTSA Driver Distraction Research: Past, Present and Future'

⁸ Crundall et al. (2006) Attraction and Distraction of Attention with Roadside Advertisements, *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 38:671-677

A National Safety Council white paper⁹ states that drivers using hands-free mobile phones have a tendency to 'look at' but not 'see' objects, with estimates indicating that drivers using a mobile phone look but fail to see up to 50 per cent of the information in their driving environment. This is known as 'inattention blindness' and means that although drivers are looking through the windscreen, they do not process everything in the road environment that they must know to effectively monitor their surroundings, identify potential hazards and respond to unexpected situations.

Although hands-free phones reduce visual (eyes off the road) and mechanical (hands off the wheel) distraction, they do not reduce cognitive distraction. Most people are able to recognise when they are visually and mechanically distracted and seek to disengage from these activities as quickly as possible. However, people often do not realise when they are cognitively distracted, such as taking part in a mobile phone conversation, and this risk lasts much longer.

Studies^{10, 11} of driver's eye fixations while performing a demanding cognitive task show that their visual field narrows both vertically and horizontally – meaning that rather than scanning the road environment for hazards they spend much more time staring ahead than usual leading to tunnel vision.

This means that drivers who are cognitively impaired will spend less time checking mirrors or looking around for hazards.

Biomechanical distraction occurs when a driver is doing something physical that is not related to driving, for example, reaching for something and out of the driving position, or holding an item.

Auditory distraction is caused when sounds prevent drivers from making the best use of their hearing, because their attention has been drawn to whatever caused the sound.

Effects of distraction

Cognitive distraction causes drivers to look at their mirrors, instrument panel and what's happening in the environment around them much less. Instead, they concentrate their observations straight ahead, and so are more likely to detect hazards later than they would otherwise have done.

Worryingly, distracted drivers underestimate the effects that distraction has on them, and do not perceive their reduced awareness or their ability to spot hazards. This may be because they are still looking at the road straight ahead and are not gathering the whole picture of the road around the vehicle.

Drivers who are distracted also have difficulty controlling their speed and their distance from the vehicle in front, and their lane position can vary drastically.

⁹ National Safety Council (2012) 'Understanding the distracted brain: why driving while using hands-free cell phones is risky behaviour' <https://www.nsc.org/getmedia/2ea8fe8b-d7b7-4194-8ea5-306d30a73972/cognitive-distraction-white-paper.pdf>: Accessed 10 May 2022

¹⁰ Recarte, M. And Nunes, L. (2000) Effects of Verbal and Spatial-Imagery Tasks on Eye Fixations While Driving, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 6(1): 31-43

¹¹ Harbluk et al. (2007) An On-Road Assessment of Cognitive Distraction: Impacts on Drivers' Visual Behaviour and Braking Performance, *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 39: 372-379

The more complex or involved a driver becomes with a distraction, the more detrimental the distraction is on their ability to make observations and control the vehicle safely.

Research has shown that drivers are more likely to accept a higher level of distraction if they judge the distracting activity relevant to the driving, for example navigating¹².

The law

There are general laws that require drivers to be attentive and not engage in distracting activities. Distracted drivers could be charged with a range of offences including Dangerous Driving, Careless and Inconsiderate Driving, Failure to Be in Proper Control of the Vehicle, or Driving without Due Care and Attention depending on how badly the distraction affected their driving.

The Construction and Use Regulations prevent the use of certain types of technology in vehicles – for example, handheld mobile phones, and it is illegal to use certain types of televisions in vehicles.

When a driver is at work, their employer also has a responsibility towards the safety of their employees, and the people they share the road with, and need to put in place all 'reasonably practicable' safety measures on work related journeys.

This includes making sure that drivers are aware of the dangers of distraction, are trained to deal with it, and are trained in the safe use of any in-vehicle technology which may cause a distraction.

Dealing with distraction

Distraction is a difficult risk to manage. On the one hand, some level of distraction is unavoidable, but drivers can take some simple steps to avoid becoming distracted.

If you need to do something distracting, find a safe place to pull over

You can prevent yourself from doing distracting things behind the wheel by finding a safe place to pull over first. By planning so that you are not trying to drive and do other tasks at the same time, you can reduce the likelihood of becoming distracted in the vehicle.

Recognise what makes you distracted

Many drivers sometimes carry out a distracting activity, without realising the extra risk that it causes. Eating or changing a song are examples of activities that drivers may do without thinking of the risks involved. Before engaging in an activity, ask yourself "will this be distracting?". Think about how you would feel if you saw another road user doing the same thing - self-assessment is an important part of developing your driving.

Concentrate on your driving

This is easier said than done, especially in uninteresting environments. However, attention to thought can reduce the quality of the observations that you make. It may be difficult to stop yourself becoming distracted

¹² Cnossen et al. (2004) Adaptive Strategy Changes as the Function of Task Demands: a Study of Car Drivers, *Ergonomics*, 47(2): 218-236

but if you find yourself engaged in thought or distracted by other means, then it is important to focus on your driving as soon as you realise.

Make sure that you are ready to drive before setting off for a journey. If you are about to drive after an emotional event, then it is best to allow yourself time to cool down.

Use technology sensibly

In-vehicle technology can be distracting, especially if there are several systems in the same vehicle. Never put too many different devices in a vehicle. If you can change the settings on the technology, then find ways of using it that is less distracting.

Many mobile phones have 'do not disturb' modes for those who are driving, which usually include silencing notifications so the driver does not hear the phone or receive notifications when they are driving and is not tempted to answer or look at it.

Plan your route in advance

All drivers dedicate a certain amount of time to navigating, this is unavoidable, but there are things you can do to reduce the time you spend navigating. By planning your route in advance and making sure you have a good idea of the directions, you may be able to reduce the time you spend looking for signs and road markings, and plan manoeuvres earlier.

Take refresher or further driver training

We all pick up bad habits over the years, several of which may be a result or cause of distraction. Refresher or further driver training can help drivers to build on the skills they have to prioritise events around a vehicle, predict hazards, and decide the safest course of action on the road.