

UW Medicine

HARBORVIEW INJURY PREVENTION AND RESEARCH CENTER

NEWS RELEASE

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STUDY FINDS NEARLY HALF OF STATE'S DISTRACTED DRIVERS ARE TEXTING

First research to examine driver use of electronic devices in Washington State

King, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, Whatcom and Yakima Counties---In the state's first study to examine driver use of electronic devices, investigators from the University of Washington found that more than 8% of drivers were engaged in the use of devices behind the wheel, higher than previously estimated. Among those driving distracted, nearly half (45%) were observed texting.

The study examined the behaviors of 7800 drivers in six counties. Using randomized observations at controlled intersections, investigators recorded drivers engaged in a range of distracting activities, including texting and talking on the phone. Researchers found that the most common source of distraction was a hand-held device such as a cell phone. Among the 3.4% of drivers who were talking on a handheld phone, half were holding the device near or under the steering wheel, a behavior considered high-risk since a driver's attention is diverted from the road.

The study has important implications for state public health and law enforcement officials. Motor vehicle injuries remain the leading cause of death for Americans under 35 years of age and estimates suggest that up to 28% of crash risk is attributable to cell phone use or text messaging in vehicles. While the use of cell phones in the U.S. has grown exponentially, enforcement of distracted driving laws has struggled to keep pace.

"These findings suggest that distracted driving is more common than we thought and that texting has become a major cause of distraction," said Dr. Beth Ebel, principal investigator with UW Medicine's Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center and associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington. "Most people support laws restricting texting and cell phone use in vehicles, yet some choose to engage in behaviors that put everyone on the road at risk. These traumatic injuries are entirely preventable," added Ebel. She noted that prior studies show texting while driving increases crash risk by 23 times, similar to driving with a blood alcohol level of 0.19.

In 2010, Washington State adopted a primary enforcement law for hand-held mobile devices and text messaging with an imposed fine of \$124. The rise in distracted driving is prompting increased attention from law enforcement. In a recent King County seat belt citation campaign more tickets were issued for cell phone use and texting than non-use of seat belts.

“Otherwise responsible drivers who talk or text have caused collisions that kill or seriously injure others. These drivers are criminally prosecuted, just like other impaired drivers,” said Amy Freedheim, Senior Deputy Prosecuting Attorney at the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office.

The data released today are preliminary results, part of a broader study conducted to explore the impact of enforcement on electronic distracted driving. In October, investigators will release a statewide report card providing expanded data by county. The report will provide a baseline assessment and help county law enforcement, prosecutors and public health officials evaluate the effectiveness of intervention strategies for enforcement of distracted driving laws. If intervention strategies are effective, it is hoped that a successful model can be developed and implemented in other states.

“These findings provide objective support for what we’ve long believed: that texting contributes to more collisions than we can prove,” said Chief John R. Batiste of the Washington State Patrol. “After a collision, drivers almost never admit they were texting. We believe the problem has, until now, been drastically under-reported.”

The study is part of a statewide collaboration between the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center, the King County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, Seattle King County Public Health, Target Zero and the Washington State Traffic Commission, and the Washington State Patrol. The research is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Public Health Law Research program to Dr. Ebel.

Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center is a worldwide leader in researching how people suffer injuries and what can be done to prevent them. Founded in 1985, the Center is affiliated with the University of Washington Medicine and Harborview Medical Center in Seattle.

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