

# Why People Text and Drive: The Distracted Driving Epidemic

You're driving down the highway. To your left, a person zooms by, talking on their cell phone. To your right, someone holds their phone by the steering wheel to send a text. Meanwhile, you hear your phone buzzing in the cup holder, but you resist the urge to look...

Despite thousands of fatal crashes, and [national educational campaigns](#) to stop distracted driving, this issue is pervasive. "Campaigns like 'don't drink and drive' have been successful, but campaigns to not use cell phones have not worked. Why?" asked one of our [distracted driving webinar](#) attendees. It's a valid question that deserves a thorough answer.

## Distracted Driving Biases and Myths

It's a *them* problem, not a *me* problem

[Research](#) shows that more than half of drivers' text and/or email while alone in a vehicle. That number increases among drivers under 34 years old. Unfortunately, it has become socially acceptable to handle phones while driving. People think, *I'm just taking my eyes off the road for a second*, and are biased about their driving skills:

According to the National Safety Council (NSC), [67% of people](#) they surveyed felt they were at risk because another driver was distracted by technology. But only 25% said their own distracted driving behavior put others at risk. The NSC adds, "This 'not me' attitude remains prevalent because people believe they are better drivers than those around them."

41% of people text and drive,  
yet over 90% consider it distracting.

Another study confirmed conflicts between what people believe about distracted driving versus how they behave. [State Farm](#) reported that a third of survey participants admitted to reading email while driving even though 92% considered that a distracting behavior. Numbers for taking texts were more daunting. 41% of participants text and read text messages while driving, despite over 90% agreeing that this behavior is distracting.

## Hitting the Brakes on Dangerous Driving

Another myth is that it's safe to engage with your phone while stopped at a redlight or stop sign. For example, a [study conducted by AAA](#) found that 26% of drivers said it was acceptable to use a cell phone if they were at a complete stop and alone in the vehicle.

How long can you remain distracted after putting your phone down?  
27 seconds.

Fleets who experience many rear-end collisions often report to us that distracted driving is the culprit. While it seems rational that you could perform a “simple task” while stopped, engaging with a phone has surprising effects. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety uncovered that even after a person puts their phone down, people remain distracted for as long as 27 seconds.

“It takes just 10 seconds to travel the length of more than a football field at 25 miles an hour. You can imagine what else can go wrong in 10 seconds or in 27 seconds. This idea that you can safely be distracted at a red light or at a stop sign is a fallacy and one that we have to get beyond,” observed Kelly Nantel, former VP of Communications and Advocacy at the NSC.

## Navigating a Tethered Society

When TRUCE measures distractions for customers, we find that users receive an average of one text message, email, or alert every six miles they drive for work. What is more concerning, however, is the compulsion to respond to those notifications.

[Asurion](#) discovered that people reach for their device an average of 352 times a day (once every two minutes and 43 seconds). More disturbing is that their findings show a 4-fold increase since their survey from just 2 years ago. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have escalated an already alarming addiction.

In addition to social reasons, work has evolved over the last few years, with many people using work apps on mobile devices. In one study, [66% of employees](#) reported regularly using smartphones to get work done, especially on personal devices.

Those driving for work may face even more pressure to stay connected. Deskless workers use mobile devices to navigate to jobs, communicate with managers, customers, or team members, or enter job-critical information. In response, companies have adopted technologies to control mobile device risks, such as [software](#) that disables specific apps and functions behind the wheel.

## Stricter Distracted Driving Laws and Enforcement

Even though [30 U.S. states](#) prohibit all drivers from using hand held cell phones while driving, distracted driving can be difficult to police. Nantel explains, “Distracted driving laws are a challenge for law enforcement. You can’t always tell when someone is on their phone, texting, or using a hands-free device.”

And after a car accident, people do not always admit to being on the phone. This is exacerbated by the fact that [crash reports are inconsistent](#) among law enforcement. Some crash reports exclude fields that would document if, and how, drivers were distracted at the time of a motor vehicle crash.

Also controversy exists around hands-free cell phone use. Hands-free device use is legally accepted across the United States but still [poses a threat](#) to drivers' visual perception and ability to quickly react.

## Reverse Distracted Driving with the “Three-Legged Stool”

Some argue that distracted driving laws and enforcement should be more stringent. Pulling from the historical examples of mandated [seat belts](#) and DUIs, laws can set a domino effect in motion, especially in conjunction with public education and enforcement:

“It takes good laws, solid enforcement, and strong public education. The three-legged stool, they call it. If you don't have all three legs of that stool, you're not going to be able to effect the kind of behavior change that you need,” says Nantel. Being consistently tougher on distracted driving could eventually reverse the cultural acceptance of using a phone while driving.

Fleet safety experts Phil Moser and Bob Mossing have pointed out that distracted driving and poor driving behavior [should carry a stigma](#) (and an appropriate punishment) – just as driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol does. They point out that many car advertisements even show risky driving in a glamorous light.

## The Distracted Driving Epidemic: Finding a Road Out

It is not a hopeless situation. Cultural change takes time. With effective educational initiatives, laws, and enforcement, it will no longer be socially acceptable to drive while distracted. In the meantime, employers can make a difference.

Employers can implement policies and programs that encourage safe driving. Employer-led driving safety programs help individuals internalize the dangers of distracted driving, the reasons to drive safely, and the corresponding habits. Nantel says, “when employers implement safety related policies, those behaviors tend to carry over into our personal lives.”

Technology will also play a role, especially in the case of employer-led driver safety programs. Because of the biases and cultural factors described above, employees are sometimes reluctant to follow companies' rules around mobile device use while driving. Sophisticated software solutions can intervene.

For example, [Contextual Mobility Management](#) suppresses unsafe and non-work-essential mobile apps on the road, sensing the user's environment in real time. This removes drivers' ability to make an unsafe choice with their mobile device and sets them up for success. In some cases, it has even helped employees break bad phone habits.

If your organization is interested in developing an effective safe driving program that eliminates distracted driving, please [contact us](#).