

Distracted Driving in Ontario

Understanding the Issue

Safe driving requires our undivided attention.

There are many possible distractions for drivers. With the popularity of mobile phones and wireless entertainment devices, drivers face more distractions than ever. Driving is a complex task that requires concentration and attention. Attention is a fixed resource; we only have a certain amount to devote to the tasks at hand. Once we exhaust this resource, it's gone – we can't simply increase our attention to a sufficient level. Instead, we must select tasks that we can manage given our attentional capacity at any one time. Driving can seem to be a 'mindless' activity because we often drive the same route at the same time each day. But, driving safely requires constant monitoring of many variables, including those that are outside of our control. Thus, trying to focus on tasks over and above those required to drive safely increases the risk of missing key information and getting into a crash.¹

Tracking & Reporting

The OPP records primary causes of collisions, as well as contributing factors.

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) manage the Collision Reporting System (CRS), which records collisions that occur on OPP jurisdiction roads. Officers report the primary cause of collisions, as well as contributing factors. This report considers the causes of motor vehicle collisions in Ontario, with a focus on distracted driving. Tables 1 and 2 show primary causes only from 2009 to 2012. For the 2013 analysis, primary causes and contributing factors were analyzed.

Primary Causes

From 2009 to 2012, distracted driving was the primary cause of 30,819 collisions and 130 fatalities.

Table 1 shows the primary causes of collisions on OPP jurisdiction roads from 2009 to 2012. The five most common causes were interaction with an animal, following too closely, driving too fast for the road or weather conditions, driver distraction and making an improper lane change. Table 2



shows the primary causes of fatal collisions. The most common causes were speeding (both excess speed and driving at a speed in excess of the road or weather conditions), driver distraction, driver losing control, and driving under the influence of alcohol.

TABLE 1. Most Common Primary Causes of Collisions in Ontario, OPP Jurisdiction Roads 2009 - 2012, OPP CRS.

Primary Cause	2009	2010	2011	2012
Animal	11,456	11,833	11,741	11,865
Following too closely	10,060	10,465	10,672	10,270
Speed - excess for conditions	10,807	8,314	10,387	8,631
Distracted Driver	7,741	7,786	7,615	7,677
Lost control	3,228	6,577	7,664	7,028
Improper lane change	4,231	4,463	4,387	4,248
Fail to yield	3,666	3,550	3,747	3,465
Alcohol	1,060	987	810	829
All other causes	16,996	15,172	15,612	14,969
TOTAL	69,245	69,147	72,635	68,982

TABLE 2. Most Common Primary Causes of Fatal Collisions in Ontario, OPP Jurisdiction Roads, 2009 - 2012, OPP CRS.

Primary Cause	2009	2010	2011	2012
Lost control	30	37	24	55
Speed - excess for conditions	26	25	21	33
Distracted Driver	29	32	37	32
Alcohol	20	25	18	25
Speed - excess	32	35	22	20
Fail to yield	28	20	18	15
All Others	16	122	120	114
Total	281	296	260	294

Fatal Collisions in 2013

In 2013, distracted driving was the primary cause of 38 fatalities and a contributing factor in an additional 35 fatalities. In total, distracted driving was involved in 73 fatalities.

The CRS data used for this analysis relates to primary causes and contributing factors for all fatal collisions on OPP jurisdiction roads in 2013. Note that at the time of the analysis, some collisions were still under investigation.

Of the 73 fatalities related to distracted driving, 44 (60%) of the victims were male. Figure 1 shows the age breakdown for distracted driving fatalities in 2013. The majority of victims were those aged 20 - 29, and 50 - 59.

FIGURE 1. Age of Victims, Fatal Distracted Driving Collisions, OPP Jurisdiction Roads, 2013, OPP CRS.

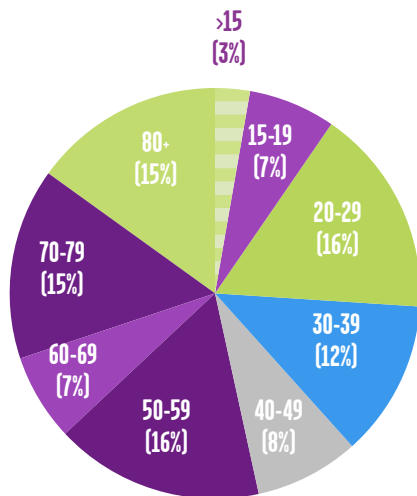
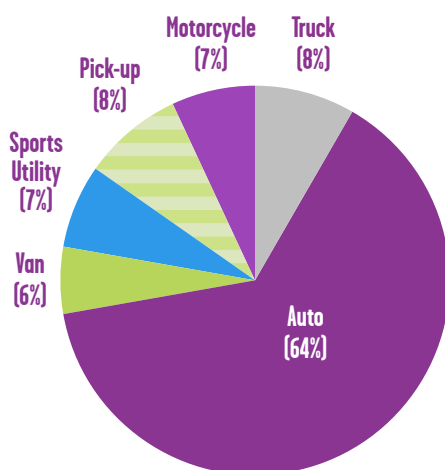
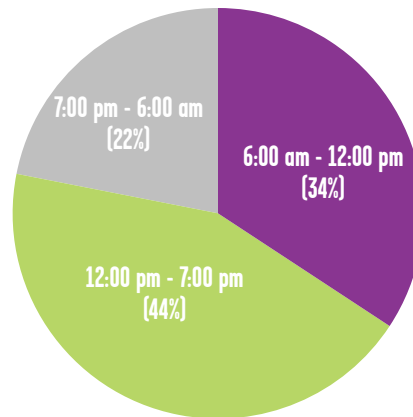


FIGURE 2. Type of Vehicle, Fatal Distracted Driving Collisions, OPP Jurisdiction Roads, 2013, OPP CRS.



In terms of vehicle type, the majority of fatalities (64%) occurred in autos, as indicated in Figure 2. Considering time of day, the majority of crashes occurred between the hours of 12:00 pm to 7:00 pm, shown in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3. Time of day, Fatal Distracted Driving Collisions, OPP Jurisdiction Roads, 2013, OPP CRS.



Challenges

Distracted driving presents unique challenges related to enforcement and engineering.

Distracted driving has many unique challenges compared to other road safety issues. Reporting and tracking distracted driving is difficult because evidence may not always be visible to officers at a crash. When speed is involved, impact damage can be assessed, or if alcohol is involved, the driver can be tested. Furthermore, enforcement is an issue because distraction is difficult to detect. In addition, new vehicles often include features that serve as distractions. Despite the belief that it is a safe alternative to hand-held devices, hands-free communication is a dangerous distraction, and many cars come equipped with this technology.²

What can we do?

Develop a comprehensive approach that focuses on education, enforcement and engineering strategies.

Distracted driving is a new priority and few prevention strategies have been extensively evaluated. Based on the evidence that is available, communities can:

- Implement proven strategies such as centreline and edgeline rumble strips, which can warn distracted drivers who leave their lane.^{3,4}
- Improve enforcement of laws related to distracted driving.
- Ensure that policy changes are accompanied by a widespread education campaign.³
- Enhance educational campaigns to raise awareness about the consequences and the social costs.⁵

Ultimately, social norms need to change. Distracted driving needs to be viewed as a socially unacceptable behaviour, as has been the case with impaired driving. Extensive and sustained education, enforcement and engineering efforts will be required to reduce preventable injuries and fatalities associated with distracted driving⁵.

References

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