

The Problem of Distracted Driving:

It only took a moment for the large, crimson Ford Explorer in front of us to travel a foot too far to the left and barrel off the side of the highway. My mother yelled in panic and slammed her foot on the brakes. I was finally forced to look up from my Nintendo-DS as the car's deceleration sent me flying from my seat and the seatbelt violently jerked me back. The police and ambulance were called immediately, and I was left in a daze, clinging onto my mother, my anchor in the flashing sea of red and blue around me.

When I brought up the crash some years later, my mom finally shed some light on the accident for me. According to the police, the man in the car had been in the middle of sending a text. As a novice driver myself, I wondered what could have been so important for the man to split his attention between his phone and the road. A family emergency? A problem at his job? Whatever the case, distracted driving cost him his life.

Of course this story is not an isolated incident; in 2017, an estimated 391,000 drivers were injured in distracted driving crashes. Before the issue can be tackled though, it is important to know what distracted driving means. Distracted driving is not just about our cellular devices. The term refers to any activity a driver engages in that distracts their attention away from the road. It can be a visual distraction like texting or even a cognitive distraction referring to when a driver may begin daydreaming. Even something as simple as answering a call acts as a virtual blindfold around a driver's eyes.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, any form of distracted driving, no matter the driver's experience, increases the likelihood of an accident by more than 6 times when compared to driving drunk. Despite experience playing little role in the prominence of distracted driving, it should be considered that teens, in fact, do display significantly higher

rates of distracted driving. In one study by the Pew Research Center, it was found that about 52% of teens have admitted to engaging in distracted driving. When I learned all of this as I was getting my learners permit, I was shocked. I sometimes began to observe other drivers around me at stoplights and quickly noticed that there was always at least one driver that could be found glancing at their phone.

I am certain we all have been guilty of distracted driving at some point. Despite seeing the impact of distracted driving firsthand as a child, I too have made the mistake of looking away from the road while stopped to change the music in my car. However, every time we reduce our attention on the road, we take a risk. We like to think these small missteps will lack consequences, but it is crucial to recognize that risk does not discriminate amongst its victims.

There are easy ways to prevent distracted driving. We can hide away distractions like our phones in our car's glove box. We can make any adjustments we need to the car windows and mirrors before beginning to move our cars. We can have other passengers in our car ensure we do not become distracted. Perhaps even our state's legislators could increase the severity of the punishments surrounding distracted driving to impede citizens. However, before we implement any of these solutions, it is important to understand one thing: to prevent distracted driving it must be attacked at its source.

Unfortunately, distracted driving has become so prominent and normalized that it has become a learned behavior passed down from parents to teens. According to the same study referenced earlier by the Pew Research Center, 48% of teens admitted to having been in a car with a distracted driver. The influence of other adults treating distracted driving as a casual deed leads to teens dismissing and justifying their own actions whilst driving. Hence, the first step in reducing distracted driving rates, is to change the rhetoric surrounding it. No longer can

distracted driving be treated haphazardly; its dire consequences must be emphasized and portrayed accurately. Adult drivers must become more aware of their actions, and teens must not be afraid to call out the drivers around them that succumb to these distractions. It is only through these incremental changes that distracted driving can be eliminated on all roads.

In the end, we must all recognize the impact our tiniest mistakes on the road could have. I urge all drivers on the road, teenagers and even experienced adults, to consider the repercussions their actions could have. Every time a driver chooses to be distracted, they not only risk their own wellbeing, they make a decision for every driver and passenger around them to take on that risk too. I hope that in the future I can continue to share my story about distracted driving and encourage others not to endanger themselves or others through their actions.

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