



Stuck in the 70s: The role of social norms in distracted driving

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ABSTRACT

Successful campaigns to end distracted driving must understand prevailing social norms for behaviors such as texting and phoning while driving. The current work examined this issue by asking younger drivers to read car crash scenarios and rate the responsibility of the driver for the crash, and to levy fines and assign jail time, as a function of whether the driver was attentive, had been drinking, or was distracted by phoning or texting. In the first experiment, ratings were performed in the absence of injunctive norm information (laws against drunk and distracted driving). In the second experiment, injunctive norm information was included. Impaired drivers were viewed as more responsible in both experiments, with texting drivers viewed as the most responsible. However, drunk drivers received the most fines and jail time. When compared to data from the 1970s, the results show that anti-drunk driving campaigns have changed how younger drivers view drunk driving, but that norms have not yet changed for distracted driving, despite consistent results showing they know the risk of driving distracted. Implications for social norm distracted driving campaigns are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In traffic safety, regulators are sometimes quick to respond to perceived threats. For example, legislators responded to public concerns by passing drunk driving laws in the United States as early as 1910 (though they were arguably not actively enforced until nearly 70 years later, Ross, 1994). In other cases, lags between adoption of new technologies and policies that govern their safe use can result in unsafe use becoming common. This can lead to delays in the enactment of safety laws, as lawmakers struggle to balance safety and the perceived desires of drivers. Even when such laws are eventually passed, it can also result in what Kahan (2000) termed the “sticky norms problem” or the point at which laws intended improve public safety are undercut by the unwillingness of law enforcement to enforce the laws in the face of negative public sentiment. The epidemic of driving while distracted by cellular communications technologies is an important example of a situation where this type of lag has failed to adequately improve safety by reducing the problem behavior. As an example, while every state has drunk driving laws, only nine states have handheld cellular phone bans and 15 states still allow texting and driving (GHSA, 2010).

There is little controversy that there is a problem with distracted driving, especially among younger drivers. Almost all younger adults report they use a cellular phone while driving (Nelson et al., 2009) and an alarmingly high number (as many as 95%) report they text and drive (Atchley et al., 2011), even though they recognize it is not safe to do so. The latest estimate from the National Safety Council is that over one-quarter of crashes may be directly related to this form of distraction (National Safety Council, 2010). These data are worrisome for a number of reasons, but the size of the impending crisis is highlighted by two facts. First, automobile crashes are the leading cause of death in younger adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008), so anything that negatively impacts driving safety in this group is problematic. Distracted driving represents a particularly risky endeavor for a younger driver. Crash risk estimates based on observation studies of driver behavior suggest that driving while texting is at least five to six times as bad as drunk driving (Klauer et al., 2006). Simulator studies of driver behavior looking at crashes, lane-keeping, and braking latency show a similar pattern (Drews et al., 2009), and also reveal that driving while talking on a hands-free phone is at least as impairing as drunk driving (Strayer et al., 2006), presumably from a reduced attentional capacity (Atchley and Dressel, 2004). Further, studies looking at the phone records of drivers that have crashed reveal an increase in risk for drivers on hands-free devices that is similar to the risk for drivers impaired by alcohol (McEvoy et al., 2005; Redelmeier and Tibshirani, 1997). Second, with each year that goes by, adoption of these technologies becomes more pervasive, overall use increases, and the average age of users decreases. The Pew Foundation

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