

Distracted Driving in Canada

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 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 our brains can effectively handle 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

Trends & Totals

In 2010, 352 fatalities and 2,029 serious injuries were recorded with distraction as a contributing factor.

Transport Canada's National Collision Database (NCDB) contains records of collisions involving distracted drivers. Data is presented in figures 1 and 2 according to fatalities and serious injuries, which are defined as those requiring/resulting in admission to the hospital. Note that in 2010, the total number of fatalities was 352, and the total number of serious injuries was 2,029. However, these totals include two jurisdictions that didn't contribute in previous years. These jurisdictions were removed from the 2006 - 2010 analysis, as shown in figures 1 and 2.



Comparisons

Distracted driving contributes to more injuries than impaired driving or speeding.

Both drinking and driving and speeding have been top priorities for injury prevention practitioners. Looking at fatalities and injuries attributed to these causes, it is

Figure 1 illustrates the total number of fatal collisions reported from 2006 - 2010, where distracted driving was recorded as a contributing factor. From 2006 to 2010, there was an 11% decrease in fatalities.

Figure 2 illustrates the total number of serious injuries recorded in Canada from 2006 - 2010, where distracted driving was recorded as a contributing factor. From 2006 to 2010, there was a 17% decrease in serious injuries.

Figure 1. Fatal Collisions in Canada where Distracted Driving was a Contributing Factor, NCDB, 2006 - 2010

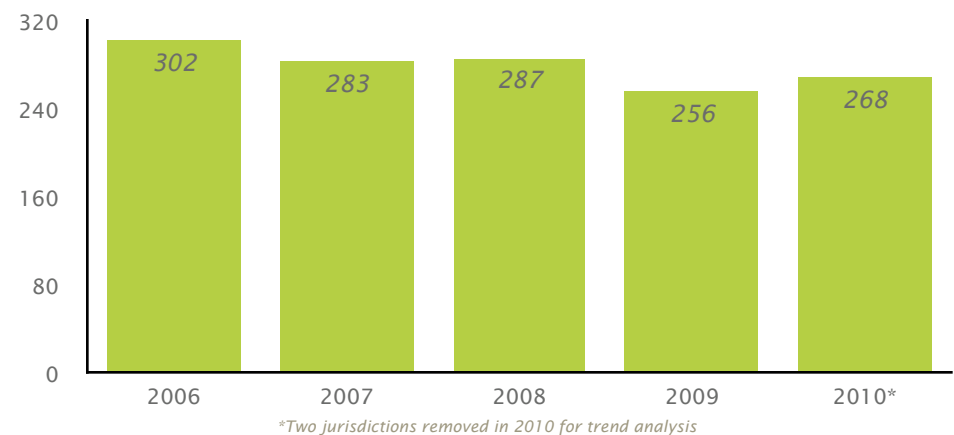


Figure 2. Serious Injuries in Canada where Distracted Driving was a Contributing Factor, NCDB, 2006 - 2010



evident that prevention efforts have had some success. Distracted driving is a relatively new issue for practitioners, and needs to be included as a top priority moving forward.

Figure 3 illustrates the number of injuries in Canada where alcohol, speed and distracted driving were contributing factors. Note that ‘injury’ includes all recorded injuries regardless of severity, as opposed to ‘serious injury’ defined above. Distracted driving contributed to more injuries than alcohol or speed from 2006 - 2010.

Figure 4 shows the number of fatalities related to alcohol, speed and distracted driving from 2006 to 2010. These data highlight the need for continued prevention efforts that focus on alcohol and speed-related issues. Further, they emphasize importance of including distracted driving as a top priority in future prevention programs.

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.⁵

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:

Figure 3. Injuries in Canada where Alcohol, Speed and Distracted Driving were contributing factors, NCDB, 2006 - 2010.

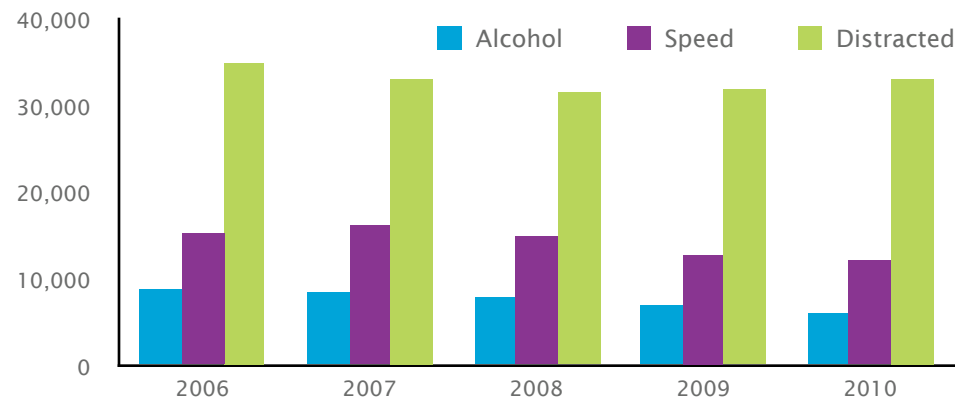
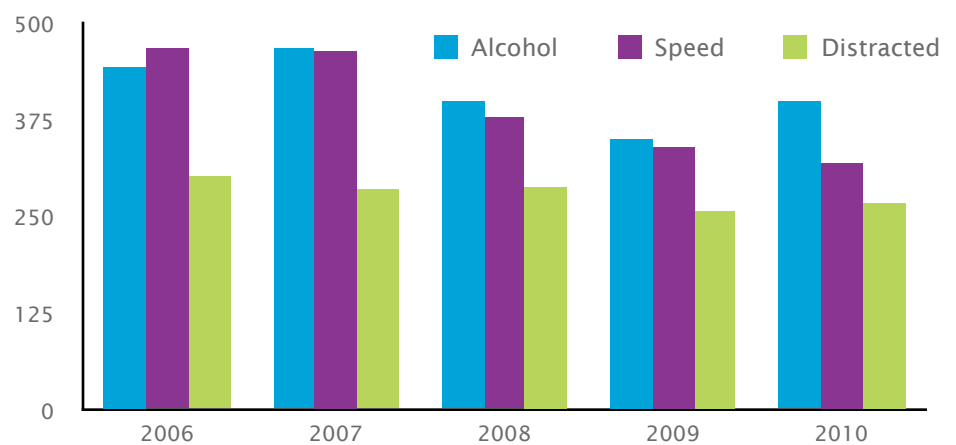


Figure 4. Fatalities in Canada where Alcohol, Speed and Distracted Driving were contributing factors, NCDB, 2006 - 2010.



- Implement traffic calming strategies such as centreline rumblestrips, medians, and other measures^{2, 4}
- Improve enforcement of laws related to distracted driving.
- Ensure that policy changes are accompanied by a widespread education campaign.²
- Enhance educational campaigns to raise awareness about the consequences and the social costs.³

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 education, enforcement and engineering efforts will be required to reduce preventable injuries and fatalities associated with distracted driving.³

References

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