

July 16, 2015

Distracted driving submission (BC Road Safety Research and Data Committee)

According to the most recent data compiled by Transport Canada, British Columbia continues to have exposure-based road trauma rates higher than the average for the country and considerably higher than the safest provinces.¹ And many countries have achieved casualty rates much lower than the Canadian average.²

We therefore appreciate the opportunity to provide input on policies aimed at reducing injuries and deaths on BC roads. We agree that distracted driving is a serious threat to road safety that needs to be addressed.

Use of Electronic Devices

Your consultation focuses on one aspect of distracted driving, the use of electronic devices. Below we provide our comments on each of the questions raised in the consultation. We follow these remarks with additional input on the broader issue of distraction.

1. Are current penalties enough?

Probably not. As indicated on your webpage, BC fines are small compared to those in other provinces. When combined with the low risk of being caught, it is likely that many drivers ignore the laws and risk fines. Therefore it makes sense to create harsher laws targeting cell phone use while driving. A combination of tougher penalties such as vehicle impounds and fines more in line with the rest of Canada may help to deter those who are likely to use an electronic device while driving. In addition, young adults, who have higher crash risk, would likely be less able to afford the cost of getting caught. However, increasing the perceived likelihood of being caught is usually more effective than increasing the penalties.^{3,4} Therefore we would also suggest increased enforcement and social marketing campaigns to create the impression that drivers using a cell phone are very likely to be caught and punished. Programs that encourage the public to report drivers using cell phones may also be helpful. These might be modeled after the “report impaired drivers” (RID) or “Curb the danger” programs in Alberta.^{5,6} The public should be motivated to report offenders (license plate, time and location, photos, etc.).

2. Should drivers be fined higher for texting?

Texting is a very high risk activity. Crash risk when using a cell phone is highest when drivers take their eyes off the road for prolonged periods (> 2 seconds)⁷ and for “visual manual” tasks such as reaching for a phone, dialing, or texting.⁸⁻¹¹ This is why texting is so dangerous – eyes off the road and hands off the wheel. Texting is far riskier than making a telephone call,^{12,13} therefore it makes sense to penalize texting more heavily. In addition, there is evidence that laws specifically targeting texting are effective in reducing texting by teen drivers.¹⁴ However, enforcement of laws against texting may be problematic because it is difficult for police to differentiate texting from dialing a phone number.¹⁵

3. Should new drivers face different sanctions?

New drivers are at high risk of crashing and their risk of crashing when engaged in distracting activities increases even more.¹¹ Many BC policies specifically target new drivers through the graduated licensing program. Such policies have been shown to lower crash and fatality risk in this group.¹⁶ It makes sense to specifically target distractions in these drivers. However police have difficulty enforcing laws that target only certain groups of drivers so enforcement may be more difficult.¹⁵

4. Should repeat offenders face different sanctions?

Yes – it makes sense that drivers who repeatedly ignore the law be penalized more harshly. Evidence from other traffic offences, for example drunk driving, indicates that repeat offenders are over-represented in fatal crashes and impart higher fatal crash risk.¹⁷ Repeat offence sanctions for electronic device use could be modeled after the successful impaired driving laws.

Other Forms of Distraction

We would now like to add comments about distracted driving more generally and encourage policies and programs that target a broader array of issues.

Distracted driving is about more than just cell phones and electronic devices. In fact, there is evidence that other forms of distraction may be more common than cell phones. Therefore, all types of distraction should be addressed. It may not be possible to outlaw all types of distraction but “anti-distraction” campaigns could educate drivers of the risks of all types of distraction.

Beanland reviewed serious injury crashes in Australia (2000 – 2011) and found that, of 340 crashes where sufficient information was available, 57.6% had evidence of driver inattention. Common causes of inattention were “fell asleep” – 40/340, “fatigued” –

37/40, “in-vehicle distractions” (including passengers, animals, radios, phones, vehicle systems) – 30/340.¹⁸

Bakiri (2013) used a responsibility analysis design to determine crash (n = 955 crashes) associated with various distracting events. There were significantly increased odds of crashing for sleep deprivation (OR = 2.1), distracting event outside vehicle (OR = 3.3), distracting event inside vehicle (e.g. picking up an object - OR = 7.3) and distraction due to driver activity (e.g. smoking, radio, drinking, eating, putting on makeup - OR = 4.8).¹⁹ There was an increased risk with cell phone use (OR = 3.4) but it was not statistically significant because of small numbers (only 8 drivers were using a phone at time of crash).

In a pilot study of minor injury crashes here in BC (n = 69 crashes), Brubacher found that 13.0% of drivers were distracted at time of crash. The sources of distraction were diverse: 1.4% using a cell phone, 1.4% adjusting the radio, 7.2% talking to passengers and 2.9% distracted by something else.²⁰

In the BC traffic accident system (TAS), “driver distraction” is commonly listed as a contributory factor in police reports but few reports cite “Use of Communication/Video Equipment”. For example, in 2012, 39.5% of all police reported crashes and 29.5% of fatal crashes listed some form of driver distraction as contributory, but only 0.3% of all crashes and 0.8% of fatal crashes specifically named “Use of Communication/Video Equipment”. It is difficult for police to prove that a driver was using a cell phone at time of crash so the prevalence of cell phone use was likely higher than these numbers suggest. Nevertheless, it appears that many crashes involving driver distraction are from something other than cell phones. It would be helpful to have better data on the actual prevalence of cell phone use at time of crash and on other causes of distraction.

If laws targeting other types of distraction (i.e. “non-cellphone”) are developed, we suggest that distraction due to use of an electronic device should yield a heftier penalty as compared to a non-electronic related distraction (such as grooming, eating, etc.) for the following reason.

Electronic device-related distractions are usually riskier than other causes of distraction. For example, Klauer used driver videotapes and found that the crash risk went up for novice drivers when dialing (OR = 8.3), reaching for a phone (OR = 7.1), reaching for another object (OR = 8.0), looking at roadside objects (OR = 3.7) or eating (OR = 3.0). For experienced drivers the crash risk when dialing a cell phone was increased (OR = 2.5) but there was no significant increased crash risk with the other activities. For novice drivers, the crash risk while texting was increased (OR = 3.9). Texting was not assessed in older drivers.¹¹

Evaluation of New Programs and Laws

To ensure that BC policies are evidence-based, new programs or laws targeting distraction should be evaluated.

We recommend conducting observational surveys before and after new policies are implemented to see if the percentage of drivers in BC using cell phones decreases. High visibility enforcement combined with cell phone bans and social marketing has been shown to reduce hand-held cell phone use elsewhere.^{21, 22-24} Data demonstrating similar results in BC would help reassure citizens that the policy is effective and help develop a culture that stigmatizes this distracted behaviour.

It is also important to see whether there is a beneficial effect on road safety – but this will be harder to demonstrate, especially since cell phone use is only one of a broad range of distractions that result in crashes. A recent review of cell phone bans concluded that it is difficult to conduct strong evaluations because of methodological challenges. The 11 studies reviewed demonstrated mixed results.²⁴ In another example, a recent evaluation of California's cell phone ban did not show a safety benefit.²⁵

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. We welcome ongoing policy measures to increase the safety of all BC citizens who use the roads, whether by foot, bike or motor vehicle.

Sincerely,

Jeff Brubacher

Chair, BC Road Safety Research and Data Committee

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