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In Study, Texting Lifts Crash Risk by Large Margin

By [MATT RICHTEL](#)

The first study of drivers texting inside their vehicles shows that the risk sharply exceeds previous estimates based on laboratory research — and far surpasses the dangers of other driving distractions.

The new study, which entailed outfitting the cabs of long-haul trucks with video cameras over 18 months, found that when the drivers texted, their collision risk was 23 times greater than when not texting.

The [Virginia Tech](#) Transportation Institute, which compiled the research and plans to release its findings on Tuesday, also measured the time drivers took their eyes from the road to send or receive texts.

In the moments before a crash or near crash, drivers typically spent nearly five seconds looking at their devices — enough time at typical highway speeds to cover more than the length of a football field.

Even though trucks take longer to stop and are less maneuverable than cars, the findings generally applied to all drivers, who tend to exhibit the same behaviors as the more than 100 truckers studied, the researchers said. Truckers, they said, do not appear to text more or less than typical car drivers, but they said the study did not compare use patterns that way.

Compared with other sources of driver distraction, “texting is in its own universe of risk,” said Rich Hanowski, who oversaw the study at the institute.

Mr. Hanowski said the texting analysis was financed by \$300,000 from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, which has the mission of improving safety in trucks and buses. More broadly, the research yielding the results represent a significant logistical undertaking.

The overall cost was \$6 million to equip the trucks with video cameras and track them for three million miles as they hauled furniture, frozen foods and other goods across the country.

The final analysis of the data is undergoing peer review before formal publication.

Tom Dingus, director of the Virginia Tech institute, one of the world’s largest vehicle safety research organizations, said the study’s message was clear.

“You should never do this,” he said of texting while driving. “It should be illegal.”

Thirty-six states do not ban texting while driving; 14 do, including Alaska, California, Louisiana and New Jersey. New York legislators have sent a bill to Gov. [David A. Paterson](#). But legislators in some states have

rejected such rules, and elected officials say they need more data to determine whether to ban the activity.

One difficulty in measuring crashes caused by texting drivers — and by [drivers talking on phones](#) — is that many police agencies do not collect this data or have not compiled long-term studies. Texting also is a relatively new phenomenon.

The issue has drawn attention after several recent highly publicized crashes caused by texting drivers, including an episode in May involving a trolley car driver in Boston who crashed while texting his girlfriend.

Over all, texting has soared. In December, phone users in the United States sent 110 billion messages, a tenfold increase in just three years, according to the cellular phone industry's trade group, CTIA.

The results of the Virginia Tech study are buttressed by new laboratory research from the [University of Utah](#). In a study over the last 18 months, college students using a sophisticated driving simulator showed an eight times greater crash risk when texting than when not texting.

That study, which is undergoing peer review and has been submitted for publication in *The Journal for Human Factors*, also found that drivers took their eyes off the road for around five seconds when texting.

David Strayer, a professor who co-wrote the University of Utah report, offered two explanations for the simulator's showing lower risks than the Virginia study. Trucks are tougher to maneuver and stop, he noted, and the college students in his study might be somewhat better at multitasking.

But the differences in the studies are not the point, Mr. Strayer said. "You're off the charts in both cases," he added. "It's crazy to be doing it."

At Virginia Tech, researchers said they focused on texting among truckers simply because the trucking study was relatively new and thus better reflected the explosive growth of texting. But another new study from the organization is focusing on texting among so-called light-vehicle drivers, specifically teenagers.

Preliminary results from that study show risk levels for texters roughly comparable to those of the truck drivers. The formal results of the light-vehicle study should be available later this year. By comparison, several field and laboratory studies show that drivers talking on cellphones are four times more likely to cause a crash than other drivers. And a previous Virginia institute study videotaping car drivers found that they were three times more likely to crash or come close to a crash when dialing a phone and 1.3 times more likely when talking on it.

Researchers focused on distracted driving disagree about whether to place greater value on the results of such a so-called naturalistic study or laboratory studies, which allow the scientists to recreate conditions and measure individual drivers against themselves.

But, in the case of texting, laboratory and real-world researchers say the results are significant — from both scientific methodologies, texting represents a much greater risk to drivers than other distractions.

A new poll shows that many drivers know the risks of texting while driving — and do it anyway. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety plans on Tuesday to publish polling data that show that 87 percent of people consider drivers texting or e-mailing to pose a "very serious" safety threat (roughly equal to the 90 percent

who consider drunken drivers a threat).

Of the 2,501 drivers surveyed this spring, 95 percent said that texting was unacceptable behavior. Yet 21 percent of drivers said they had recently texted or e-mailed while driving.

About half of drivers 16 to 24 said they had texted while driving, compared with 22 percent of drivers 35 to 44.

“It’s convenient,” said Robert Smith, 22, a recent college graduate in Windham, Me. He says he regularly texts and drives even though he recognizes that it is a serious risk. He would rather text, he said, than take time on a phone call.

“I put the phone on top of the steering wheel and text with both thumbs,” he said, adding that he often has exchanges of 10 messages or more. Sometimes, “I’ll look up and realize there’s a car sitting there and swerve around it.”

Mr. Smith, who was not part of the AAA survey, said he was surprised by the findings in the new research about texting.

“I’m pretty sure that someday it’s going to come back to bite me,” he said of his behavior.

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