

# Distracted driving among teens threatens public health and safety

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Motor vehicle crashes rank as the leading cause of teen deaths and in 2008, 16% of all distraction-related fatal automobile crashes involved drivers under 20 years of age. These grim statistics, coupled with an increasing nationwide awareness of the dangers of distracted driving for all ages, prompted the publication of an important supplement to the *Journal of Adolescent Health* that explores the causes of distracted driving and offers practical recommendations to reduce the incidence of distracted driving among teens.

"Although public health efforts have made some progress in reducing risk of adolescent [motor vehicle crashes](#) over the last three decades, new technologies and evolving behavior patterns have focused attention on the risk of [distracted driving](#)," observes Guest Editor C. Raymond Bingham, PhD, from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute, Ann Arbor, MI. "For many of the same reasons that alcohol-impaired driving represents a distinct risk for adolescents, distracted driving has an elevated impact on this age group. The unique challenge posed by the proliferation of new technological distractions may accelerate this risk behavior and may lend itself to innovative prevention efforts."

The issues involved are not simple. While there are many different causes of distracted driving, the aim of the supplement is to take a broad view of the topic instead of focusing on the individual sources of distraction. The goal is to give researchers, practitioners, lawmakers, parents, and teens a better understanding of why distracted driving is a

potentially deadly activity and steps that might be taken to reduce the number of crashes it causes.

An important issue for the public as well as legislators, former United States Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood comments, "This special *Journal of Adolescent Health* supplement brings the important issue of driver distraction and [young drivers](#) into focus. The articles presented cover a variety of the influences on young drivers' distractibility and safety as well as the important influence of parents, peers, and technology. While there is no single (simple or quick) solution to this problem, this research can lay a substantive foundation for additional debate and informed and effective policies to address the complex problem of distracted driving among young drivers and the larger driving population as a whole."

The supplement examines the issues surrounding distracted driving by teens, exploring developmental states and changes that are associated with adolescents' distractibility and their relation to driving, examining patterns of distraction among newly licensed adolescents as well as brain function, considering the potential role played by parental modeling of distracted behavior while driving, accounting for the role of technology and the influence of peer passengers and society norms, and investigating policy, legislation, and intervention.

One of the ideas that the supplement highlights is that there are a multitude of complicated factors that result in teens being more vulnerable to the effects of distracted driving than other age groups. In the article "Adolescence, Attention Allocation, and Driving Safety," by Daniel Romer, PhD, et al, the authors explore the explanations behind why teens fail to pay attention, including brain immaturity and lack of driving experience. Their review points to extensive new driver training as a way to help compensate for the unique problems teenage drivers face when it comes to focusing on the road.

Another issue the supplement addresses is what can specifically be done to prevent distracted driving among teens. "Young Driver Distraction: State of the Evidence and Directions for Behavior Change Programs," by Lisa Buckley, PhD, et al, discusses different methods used to both educate and prevent distracted driving. While the authors argue that legislative and contextual interventions can be effective prevention strategies, they also recognize that there is an unmet need for behavioral change programs designed to pinpoint the most at-risk groups, identify their risk and protective factors, and then design effective interventions tailored to their specific needs.

Current evidence regarding laws to limit cell phone use for talking or texting that are now in place in many jurisdictions suggests that these laws are either ineffective or may have an unintended effect, according to Johnathon P. Ehsani, PhD, and co-authors in "The Impact of Michigan's Text Messaging Restriction on Motor Vehicle Crashes."

Dr. Bingham concludes, "In the near future, and perhaps for years to come, reducing [driver distraction](#) to increase roadway safety is going to be increasingly challenging. As automated functions increase in vehicles, drivers are likely to feel that their attention to the road is less necessary." He continues, "Cultural attitudes and values and the public's tolerance for distracted driving need to be targeted by informative and persuasive public health campaigns that make evident the need and create a public demand for individual behavior change."

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