

Risk of distracted driving predicted by age, gender, personality and driving frequency

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New research identifies age, gender, personality and how often people drive as potential risk factors for becoming distracted while driving. Young men, extroverted or neurotic people, and people who drive more

often were more likely to report being distracted, while older women and those who felt that they could control their distracted behavior were less likely to report distraction. Published today in *Frontiers in Psychology*, this is the first study of how personal traits affect driver distraction. The study also proposes future directions for interventions to reduce distracted driving.

The World Health Organization estimates that more than 1 million people are killed in [road traffic accidents](#) each year. Driver distractions, including answering the phone or fiddling with the radio, are a factor in many accidents. The risk of being involved in an accident increases dramatically after just two seconds of [distraction](#)—so understanding and reducing driver distraction will help to save lives.

Predicting and explaining distracted behavior is difficult, as people often don't intend to reduce their focus on driving, and may feel they have little control over it. Researchers have not previously examined the link between someone's attitudes and intentions regarding [distracted driving](#) and how often they are distracted during driving. In addition, the link between distracted driving and gender, age and personality, is not completely understood.

Ole Johansson, a researcher at the Institute of Transport Economics in Norway, investigated these issues by surveying a large group of Norwegian high-school students and a group of Norwegian adults. The surveys covered a variety of topics, including the frequency and type of distractions the participants experience during driving, their attitudes and intentions around driver distractions, and their personalities.

The surveys revealed that overall rates of driver distraction were low and that fiddling with the radio was the most common distractor. However, some of the most prominent predictors of distraction were age and gender.

"I found that [young men](#) were among the most likely to report distraction," says Johansson. "Others more prone to distraction include those who drive often, and those with neurotic and extroverted personalities."

People who felt that distracted driving was more socially acceptable, or that it was largely beyond their control, were also more likely to report distracted driving. However, [older women](#) and those who felt that they could control their distractive behavior were less likely to report distraction.

The study also examined the effectiveness of an [intervention](#) to reduce distracted driving. Participants chose plans to reduce their distractive behavior by matching "if" statements such as "if I am tempted to drive faster than the speed limit while on the highway" with "then" statements such as "then I will remind myself that it is dangerous and illegal to do so". A control group was provided with information about driving distractions, but made no plans. A follow-up survey two weeks later measured driver distraction in the two groups.

Both the intervention group and the [control group](#) showed a similar decline in distracted driving, meaning that the intervention itself was not effective. Simply being exposed to material about distracted driving and completing the survey may have been enough for the participants to become more aware of their distractions.

Johansson believes one key to successful future interventions lies in allowing the participants to devise their own plans, rather than choosing from a list, so that they are more engaged. Interventions could also focus on the needs of high-risk groups.

"Tailored interventions to reduce [driver distraction](#) could focus on at-risk groups, such as young males with bad attitudes to distracted driving

and a low belief that they can control their distraction," he concludes.

More information: *Frontiers in Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01957](https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01957)

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