

## **In My Daughter's Defense: A Perspective on Driver Distraction and Telematics**

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### **Abstract**

Perspectives on telematics, from the standpoint of driver distraction, are of great importance to highway safety. In this paper, my reasons for becoming involved in this issue are explained. Questions are raised regarding the implementation of national policy to insist that all states document telematics use on their crash reports. A research concept regarding the level of experience a driver has in using telematics while driving is presented. Recommendations for public education in the area of driver distraction are suggested. Finally, a perspective on banning telematics is discussed.

### **Perspective**

I am a Registered Nurse by profession, but my most important role is that of a wife and a mother. I don't pretend to be an expert in telematics development, cognitive load, or research modalities. I came to Washington today, as a concerned citizen, to share my views on driver distraction and telematics in hopes that you will walk away with a deeper understanding of the problem and what you can do to help.

I have a personal interest in this issue because almost three years ago my 21-year-old daughter, Angela, along with one of her friends, was killed in a crash in which the driver of the other vehicle was using a cell phone. This driver was unaware that she was speeding and did not see the car in which my daughter was a passenger prepare to make a turn, both classic examples of driver distraction. It was a clear night with little traffic on the road, no alcohol involved, and everyone was wearing their seat belts. But on that night two young lives were unnecessarily lost. Friends and family have felt the pain of their loss every day since. Could something have been done to prevent it?

Clearly, the present data collection system doesn't reflect trends in the association of telematic device use and automobile crashes and fatalities. Only two states have changed their crash reports to include a place for police officers to check whether a cell phone was in use at the time of a crash or traffic infraction. Couldn't a national policy be made to insist that all states document telematics use, including the type of device used? Although this information may not be entirely reliable and accurate, it could provide a pool of subjects from which qualitative research could be done and polls could be taken. In addition, everyday drivers would be more aware of the potential for this information to be monitored and, thus, perhaps be more selective in their decisions to use these devices while driving. Incidence of use could dramatically drop while research continues, with the probability that lives will be saved. Please consider mandating that this information be accumulated.

There are questions in the driver distraction research regarding the level of experience the driver has in using telematics while driving. A group of experienced subjects, police officers, who have advanced driver training backgrounds coupled with routine multi-tasking requirements such as responding to radio dispatch transmissions, making reports on computers, and, in some localities, managing GPS systems while driving could be compared with novice drivers whose expertise in managing telematic devices is limited. Visual, mechanical, auditory, and cognitive distraction could be measured in both groups. The research results could help the public in assessing their own abilities to drive safely while multi-tasking.

Concerning safety, it is of utmost importance that more public education be done in the area of driver distraction. At the very least, the NHTSA can continue to post the important research papers on their website for the public to access and then, make informed decisions about using a telematic device while driving. Efforts such as those by the National Wireless Safetalk Center and the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety can be publicized and have funds appropriated for them. Medical professionals, teachers, and law enforcement agencies, too, are in ideal positions to teach the risk factors associated with driver

distraction and measures to implement safety. Successful strategies that MADD has used to get their message across can be replicated, measuring results in frequent evaluations. Each subset of the population (teenagers, adults who attend remedial driving schools for tickets they received, the elderly, business professionals, and an often overlooked group, children) should be targeted. At this point, education must be emphasized as much as research in terms of dollars spent.

As you can tell, I am presently not an advocate of legally banning telematics while driving (though I don't use them when I drive, and, further, will not speak to anyone on the phone if I am aware that they are using them while driving). Bills that grow government and evoke further intrusion into people's lives are unnecessary. Safety legislation is needed when we, as consumers, aren't being responsible in complying with known risks associated with certain behaviors, such as our laws regarding seat belt and motorcycle helmet use. Let's educate the public so *they* can assume responsibility for the choices they make.

The act of driving, itself, is multi-tasked. When telematics are added to this task, driver distraction will occur. My daughter's death demonstrates how lethal telematics and driving can be. Surely it won't take a huge lawsuit against a manufacturer, insurance company, or business whose employees routinely use telematics before we take action. I, for one, don't want any other mother, sister, or friend to go through what I have...the needless loss of a loved one!

As a nurse, I am passionate about saving lives. While experts in the field, such as yourselves, go about your daily tasks of formulating research questions, collecting data, and statistical analysis, I want you to remember the faces of two young girls who died too soon. What will you do to prevent further tragedies?

- 1) Mandate that every state collect telematic use on crash reports.
- 2) Continue research, posting results on the internet.
- 3) Target all age groups with public education on risk factors and safety measures while research continues.
- 4) Consider legislation to restrict telematic use while driving **IF** it proves necessary.
- 5) Never forget that there's a face, *a lost love*, associated with every fatality.