



Overview of Results From the International Traffic Safety Data and Analysis Group Survey on Distracted Driving Data Collection and Reporting

In the fall of 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation amplified a conversation that had been taking place on a much smaller scale in recent years. With that, the Distracted Driving Summit 2009 began a coordinated, national effort to curtail crashes and the resulting injuries and fatalities associated with distracted driving. During the summit, the Department released data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration showing that in 2008 almost 6,000 people died in crashes involving reports of distracted driving, and an estimated 20 percent of all crashes on U.S. roadways involved distracted driving (Ascone, 2009). Despite the relatively large portion of crashes with reports of distracted driving, NHTSA believes the involvement of distraction in crashes is underreported. As a follow-up activity to the summit, NHTSA began an initiative as part of the Distracted Driving Plan to improve data collection for distracted driving involvement in crashes. One effort of that initiative was to survey the international crash data collection community to identify methods that others are undertaking to collect and report on crashes involving distracted driving.

Methodology

In early 2010, NHTSA developed and administered a survey to the international motor vehicle data collection community via the International Traffic Safety Data and Analysis Group, which takes its acronym, IRTAD, from its International Road Traffic and Accident Database at www.irtad.net. The NHTSA survey pertained to the definition of distraction for the responding country (activities included in the definition), data collection methods, and means of reporting crash and injury data regarding distracted driving. The participating countries had approximately one and a half months to complete and return the survey. Completion of the survey was entirely voluntary. Since this effort was a means by which NHTSA was looking to learn from other countries, survey information from the United States is not included in the results, but is discussed in comparison to the results. The questionnaire is provided in the appendix. The survey was sent to 29 IRTAD member countries. NHTSA received responses from 16 countries, a response rate of 55 percent.

Survey Results

Respondent countries across the globe generally collect data on motor vehicle crashes from area police or law enforcement agencies. Additionally, injury and fatality data are retrieved from hospitals to accompany crash information from law enforcement. Finland uses data collected from multidisciplinary accident investigation teams. These collection methods are similar to those of the United States, where motor vehicle crash data is collected from police accident reports (PARs); in some police jurisdictions, additional information from hospitals or investigators is also used as source information.

With respect to distracted driving, 11 of the responding countries identified distraction in the motor vehicle crash information. Table 1 details which countries identify distraction

Table 1. Collection of Distracted Driving Crash Data for Respondent Countries

| Country | Total Crashes | Fatal Crashes | Injury Crashes | Does Not Report |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Austria | | X | | |
| Canada | X | X | X | |
| Finland | | X | | |
| France | | X | X | |
| Great Britain | X | X | X | |
| Hungary | | X | X | |
| Japan | X | X | X | |
| New Zealand | X | X | X | |
| Spain | | X | X | |
| Sweden | | X | | |
| Switzerland | X | X | X | |
| Australia | | | | X |
| Belgium | | | | X |
| Germany | | | | X |
| Greece | | | | X |
| Israel | | | | X |

for total crashes, fatal crashes, and injury crashes. The United States identifies distraction for fatal crashes, injury crashes and property-damage-only crashes (thus total crashes).

The ability to glean information about driver distractions at the time of the crash is difficult. Responding countries collected this information through interviews with crash victims and witnesses, investigation of the crashes and crash scenes, as well as telephone records at times. However, in a few of the responding countries some of these details are collected but not included in the statistical data record used for reporting of incidents. The United States uses interviews and investigations for crash-specific information, but access to phone records is not widespread practice if used at all.

One challenge that the United States faces is that between police jurisdictions, there are different methods by which the law enforcement officers record the data on an accident reporting form. Based upon the PAR provided by the State, some police jurisdictions have a reporting form that contains a specific field to record whether or not a driver was distracted and subsequently lists activities that may be considered distractions. Other police jurisdictions in the United States rely on the details of the narrative portion of the reporting form to record driver distraction and specific activities included as such. From the responses to the survey, other countries are experiencing similar differences in recording of distracted driving. Some respondent-countries cited the use of fields on a reporting form for driver-factors or driver-related-factors under which distraction would fall. Other fields noted by responding countries were influential factor, driver circumstance and driver behavior. A few responding countries stated they record the involvement of distraction in the narrative portion of a reporting form. Two countries (Austria and Sweden) stated that the information is not recorded in a systematic manner across the country, as is the situation in the United States.

With the increasing presence of communication technologies provided as original equipment in the vehicle or portable equipment brought into the vehicle, these electronic communication devices are receiving increased attention regarding their role in a motor vehicle crash. The survey asked about both cell phone use and text messaging with regard to crash involvement. Few countries specifically identify cell phone use as the distracting activity and even fewer identify text messaging. The countries that identify these are shown below, along with the specificity of the activity with the cell phone or texting device.

Cell Phone Use

- Finland – specifically identifies phone use at the time of the crash, phone in the car but the use was unknown, hand-held mobile phone, and hands-free mobile phone
- Great Britain – specifically identifies hands-free mobile phone use

- Japan – specifically identifies phone use at the time of the crash, hand-held mobile phone use, and hands-free mobile phone use
- New Zealand – does not identify specific activities/characteristics with the phone, just a general classification that a cell phone was involved
- Switzerland – specifically identifies phone use at the time of the crash

Text Messaging

- Finland – does not identify specific activities with regard to text messaging, just that a text messaging device was involved
- Japan – specifically identifies whether the driver was sending or receiving a text and whether the texting device was integrated into the vehicle

The United States attempts to identify cell phone use as a specific type of distraction, but currently gets little information about text messaging. There are efforts underway to recommend police jurisdictions identify both cell phone activities and text messaging activities on the police accident report.

From reviewing the literature regarding distraction-specific activities, there are differing positions on whether fatigue or sleeping is considered a distraction as well as whether the emotional state of a driver is considered distraction. From the results of the survey, most countries do not include fatigue and sleeping as distracted driving, as is the position of NHTSA. Eleven responding countries (Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, and Switzerland) do not consider emotional distress or emotional elation as a distraction. Three (Canada, Finland, and New Zealand) of these countries do, however, consider these emotional state of the driver in the more general category of inattention, which is how NHTSA will begin to classify emotion as of September 2010. Four responding countries (France, Great Britain, Japan, and Spain) include the emotional state of the driver as a distraction.

In addition to questions about data collection, the survey included some questions about reporting of driver distraction in motor vehicle crashes. Those countries that do report distraction involvement provide such data on a national level. Depending on the method of data collection, regional reporting is less frequent. Oftentimes, regional data may be available from the data but such regional reports are only performed upon request of an organization within the country. Switzerland does not provide regional reports at all.

Most countries do not report on distracted driving involvement as related to exposure data, thus not able to provide a rate-based figure. France, starting in 2009, estimates the use of mobile phones when driving (excluding hands-free devices) via a national observational survey. The United States also has such a survey that provided estimates of cell phone

use at any given daylight time (the National Occupant Protection Use Survey).

Given the challenges of identifying and collecting driver distraction involvement in motor vehicle crashes, NHTSA discloses the limitations of the data in the data reports. Such limitations (for the United States) include:

- The data for FARS and GES are based on PARs and investigations that are conducted *after* the event has occurred. Police accident reports vary by state, thus creating potential inconsistencies in reporting. Many variables on the police crash report are concrete across the jurisdictions, but distraction is not one of those variables. Some police crash reports identify distraction as a distinct reporting field, while others do not have such a field and identification of distraction is based upon the narrative portion of the report. The FARS and GES data discussed in this research note are only those crashes in which at least one form of driver distraction was reported by law enforcement, thus presenting a potential for an undercount of crashes and fatalities.
- There are negative implications associated with distracted driving, especially in conjunction with a crash. Survey research shows that self-reporting of negative behavior is lower than actual occurrence of that negative behavior. There is no reason to believe that self-reporting of distracted driving to a law enforcement officer would differ. The inference here is that reported driver distraction during crashes is lower than the actual occurrence.
- If a driver fatality occurs in the crash, law enforcement must rely on the crash investigation in order to report on whether driver distraction was involved. Law enforcement may not have information to indicate distraction.

Six responding countries (Finland, France, Great Britain, New Zealand, Spain, and Switzerland) also include similar discussions with such information as:

- Large proportions of missing data for distraction elements;
- Need for improvement in specific details of the distraction activities;
- Difficult to ascertain the specific activity of the driver (at the time of the crash) at the crash site;

- No clear definition of what police should consider as distraction; and
- Three countries stated discussions of limitations without specifications.

Reference

Ascone, Debra S. (2009). *An Examination of Driver Distraction as Recorded in NHTSA Databases* (DOT HS 811 216). Washington, DC: NHTSA.

Appendix – Survey Questionnaire

Please complete the following survey as it pertains to data collection and reporting on motor vehicle crashes, or accidents, involving distracted driving. We are interested in learning about your definitions of distracted driving as well as the collection and reporting processes. As noted in the second section of the questionnaire, distracted driving is broadly considered the involvement in an activity that distracts the mind, eyes and/or hands from the primary task of driving. This definition may differ in your country. The survey questions attempt to identify specific activities or behaviors of particular interest in the distracted driving discussion. Your completion of this survey is greatly appreciated. If there are any questions regarding the survey, please contact Debbie Ascone with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, United States Department of Transportation, 202-366-0557 or debbie.ascone@dot.gov.

| | |
|---|---|
| <i>The survey questions are contained in this column.</i> | <i>Please respond to the questions in this column, unless otherwise directed.</i> |
| The following questions pertain to motor vehicle accident data collection. | |
| What government agency or corporate entity is responsible for collecting data on motor vehicle crashes for the nation (country) as a whole? | |
| What is the original reporting format for the motor vehicle accident information (law enforcement, special crash investigators, news reporting, survey data, etc.)? | |
| Is the collection of motor vehicle accident data uniform across the country (i.e. are all reporting criteria and formats identical)? | |
| Is the same group responsible for dissemination, or reporting, of the data? | |
| If different, what group is responsible for the reporting of motor vehicle accident data? | |

| <i>The survey questions are contained in this column.</i> | <i>Please respond to the questions in this column, unless otherwise directed.</i> |
|---|---|
| The following questions pertain to the collection of distracted driving accident data (involvement in an activity that distracts the mind, eyes and/or hands from the primary task of driving). | |
| Do you collect accident data that would identify distracted driving? | |
| Total accidents? | |
| Fatal accidents? | |
| Injury accidents? | |
| Do you identify mobile phone use, specifically, in your categorization of distraction behaviors? | |
| Phone in use at time of accident? | |
| Phone in car (vehicle) but use unknown? | |
| Hand held mobile phone? | |
| Hands free mobile phone? | |
| Phone integrated into vehicles? | |
| Do you identify use of texting/SMS devices at time of crash, in categorization of distraction behavior? | |
| Sending text/SMS message? | |
| Receiving/reading text/SMS message? | |
| Text/SMS device integrated into vehicle? | |
| If a driver is identified as fatigued or sleeping at the time of the accident, is this behavior grouped with distraction behaviors or kept separate from distraction behaviors? | |
| Is emotional distress or emotional elation considered a distracted behavior? | |
| If not specifically a distraction, would emotional state of mind be considered an inattentive driving behavior in your data collection? | |
| Is the data regarding distracted driving behavior collected in specific fields on reporting forms (if forms are used)? Or is the distracted driving behavior data surmised through the narrative/summary portion of a reporting form? | |
| How is the information about distraction activities reported/recorded? (Interview with driver/occupant, witness by recording officer, interview with witnesses, cell phone records, etc.) | |

| <i>The survey questions are contained in this column.</i> | <i>Please respond to the questions in this column, unless otherwise directed.</i> |
|--|---|
| The following questions pertain to the reporting of distracted driving crash data. | |
| Do you report distracted driving data for the nation as a whole? | |
| Do you report distracted driving data for regions within your nation? | |
| If you do not report by region, why do you not report by region? | |
| How do you report the data on accidents involving driver distraction? | |
| Total number? | |
| By age? | |
| By vehicle type? | |
| Single year or multiple years aggregated? | |
| By specific activity? | |
| Do you pair your distracted driving accident data with exposure data? | |
| If so, what is the exposure data you use? | |
| Do you discuss any limitations to the reported data? | |
| If so, can you please describe them? | |
| Is the national accident data the sole source of data on distracted driving that you have? | |
| Are there studies or special accident investigations that have been performed to look into distracted driving? | |
| Do you believe that collection of distracted driving has changed over the past ten years? | |
| If so, does that preclude you from reporting trend data on distracted driving? | |
| Publication of Distracted Driving Data | |
| Could you please provide a link to a published document, or attach a file, that discusses the incidence of distracted driving in your country? | |



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