

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading.
3. Write a 1+ page reflection.

Highways Are Getting Deadlier, with Fatalities Up 22%. Our Smartphone Addiction Is a Big Reason Why

Source: Russ Mitchell, *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 2023

Highway fatalities are on the rise again — 46,000 in the U.S. in 2022, up 22%, according to numbers released last week. How many of those deaths involved distracted driving?

“It’s much bigger than the data show,” said Bruce Landsberg, vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board. Data collection methods are so riddled with problems, he said, that reliable estimates are difficult if not impossible.

But if those methods aren’t improved, and soon, Landsberg said, the carnage induced by unsafe use of cellphones and other forms of distracted driving will continue.

“This is an epidemic,” he said. And it’s not just deaths. “Everybody talks about fatalities, but there are hundreds of thousands or more life-altering injuries — broken limbs, brain injuries, horrible burns. This doesn’t have to happen. These crashes are not accidents. They are completely preventable.”

Landsberg is part of the National Distracted Driving Coalition, a group formed in 2021 that’s redoubling efforts to try to fix the data problem to help persuade cellphone makers, motor vehicle manufacturers, software companies, lawmakers and distracted drivers themselves that the problem constitutes a public health crisis that all parties have let slide.

The group is also attempting to do what the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the nation’s top auto safety regulator, has been struggling with: take advantage of new technologies including machine learning to better measure the prevalence of distracted driving on U.S. highways and to make serious efforts to reduce it.

Lawmakers at the state and federal levels often resist tougher laws on distracted driving, said Robyn Robertson, chief executive of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation, a member of the distracted driving coalition, in part because drivers addicted to their phones aren’t clamoring for them. Neither drivers nor lawmakers understand the severity of the problems, according to the NDDC.

“If we can’t show it’s a problem, then we can’t focus attention and resources on fixing it,” Robertson said.

The most recent figures available from NHTSA show that of 38,824 highway deaths in pandemic year 2020, 3,142 were due to distracted driving — less than 10%. NHTSA tallied 324,652 distracted driving injuries. Among experts in the field, NHTSA’s numbers are widely regarded as gross underestimates. The National Distracted Driving Coalition estimates the actual numbers lie between 25% to 30%, but no one can say for sure.

The reasons are many: The country’s car crash data system was created decades ago and has not kept up with technological progress; different states and different police departments collect data in different ways, sometimes still in paper accident report forms that don’t include check boxes or sections for distracted driving; at crash scenes, distracted driving is rarely obvious, and proving someone was using a cellphone can be a lengthy, complicated endeavor; and drivers are reluctant to admit that they were using their phone before a crash. In some cases, the driver and other witnesses might be dead and unable to offer any testimony.

It’s relatively easy to figure out whether someone was speeding or drunk or high, according to Robertson. “You’re either speeding or you’re not. You’re either impaired or you’re not. When it comes to distractions, it’s less clear-cut,” she said.

NHTSA has been studying ways to improve injury and death data collection for decades, with little progress. The federal safety agency has long been criticized for appearing to put auto industry concerns ahead of public safety. Over a period of years, the agency has declined multiple requests by *The Times*, including for this story, to interview NHTSA leaders about the issue.

The National Transportation Safety Board, Landsberg’s agency, is a government body charged with investigating motor vehicle, rail, ship and airline crashes and making recommendations to regulators and

lawmakers. It's sometimes confused with NHTSA, which is the agency charged with regulation and enforcement.

"We can't compel anybody to do anything," Landsberg said. Sometimes NHTSA follows the NTSB's recommendations, but often it does not.

Distracted driving laws have been passed in many of the 50 states but differ in requirements and in level of enforcement, according to the Governors Highway Safety Assn.

So the National Distracted Driving Coalition is attempting to pull together data from academics and other researchers, safety groups and commercial operations to better identify and understand the issues involved.

In December, the group released a report packed with data from studies and surveys, including one survey of consumers that showed 67% of respondents were "concerned" about hand-held phone use while driving — and about a third were not. Concern about texting while driving reached 80%.

The report includes 2022 survey results from the Travelers insurance company that showed:

- 77% said they used their phone while driving
- 74% used cellphone maps
- 56% read a text or email
- 27% updated or checked social media
- 19% — 1 out of 5 — shopped online while driving.

The report also ticked off some advances being made using modern technologies that have gone mostly ignored by government regulators.

One is the use of video cameras and machine learning, a branch of artificial intelligence, to assess the prevalence of cellphone driver distraction in real time. The systems peer into the windshields of passing cars and assess whether someone is using their phone or not.

The systems hide faces and other individual markings and aggregate the data to assess trends and, the makers say, are not used to make a legal case against individual drivers.

"We build privacy protections into the system, for use by researchers," said Josh Graver, chief executive of PathZero.ai, a Boston company affiliated with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Video records "are deleted as soon as they're not needed."

Other companies are doing what safety advocates wish the cellphone companies would do: Disable the most driver-distracting features of a phone or in-car infotainment system while the car is in operation.

"The phone companies and the tech companies, they are the ones that created this issue, they can fix it if they want to," Landsberg said. And motor vehicle manufacturers too: "They are putting 14-inch screens" in the car, he said. "Where do you think the driver will be looking?"

A company called NoCell Technologies in Aliso Viejo sells its services to commercial fleets that have high incentives to enforce safe driving among their workers: Deep-pocketed corporations are more likely to be sued when their distracted employees or contractors crash.

The NoCell system can disable phone features or the entire phone, and report whether a driver is using a phone, when and for how long.

The drivers "don't hear buzzes, beeps or dings while the vehicle is in motion, so they're not reaching for the phone and looking down causing crashes," said Corey Woinarowicz, NoCell's chief revenue officer.

"Technology got us into this mess and technology is going to have to get us out of this mess."

Of course, drivers themselves could self-discipline against dangerous phone use, but that would require both honest self-assessment of personal behavior and the willpower not to respond to the temptation — which seems unlikely to happen on a mass scale.

"We tell ourselves it always happens to someone else," Landsberg said, which leads to the conclusion that "it's not an issue."

Possible Response Questions

- What are your thoughts about the increasing danger on our highways?
- Did something in the article surprise you? Discuss.
- Pick a word/line/passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a "move" made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.