

Distracted Driving Laws Still Have a Way to Go

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Sleep-deprived drivers pose similar risks on the road as drivers distracted by smartphones, but most state's laws don't reflect this danger, argues a dental sleep medicine practitioner.

By Jeff Rodgers, DMD, D-ABDSM, D-ASBA

So far, 47 states have passed laws that ban texting while driving, and many have taken this concept a step further, explicitly banning drivers from using handheld devices. Georgia is the latest state to follow suit. The "Hands-Free Georgia Act," which went into effect on July 1, comes with many nuances, but in general motorists will be prohibited from holding a cell phone or other electronic device while behind the wheel.

Those in support of the law hope it will reduce the rising death toll on Georgia roads, which was 1,549 in 2017, according to the Georgia Department of Transportation. Similarly alarming numbers are reflected nationally. In 2016, 3,540 people were killed by distracted driving alone, according to the United States Department of Transportation.

This is a significant problem making our roads unsafe, and a large majority of drivers in the United States are at fault. Zendrive, a startup that gathers analytics on driver behavior, conducted the "largest distracted driving study to date" to assess the frequency of cell phone usage while behind the wheel. The 2017 study analyzed 3.1 million American drivers covering 5.6 billion miles. It was found that in 88% of trips, drivers were on their smartphones, which averaged 3.5 minutes of every hour. Taking your eyes off the road for two seconds increases your likelihood of a crash by over 20 times, according to Oregon State University.

While I commend these bills nationwide as a necessary step forward in lessening America's worrying amount of distracted drivers, its passage only scratches the surface of why someone behind the wheel might take their eyes off the road. The use of technology is just one of those reasons.

Another less obvious, and therefore perhaps more sinister, trap that leads to distracted driving is something that everyone will admit to at one time or another: sleep deprivation. A sleep-deprived driver may or may not physically feel any differently than when they are fully rested, but their focus, coordination, and reaction time will dramatically decrease, putting them at high risk for an accident.

It's widely known that between 7 and 9 hours of sleep are needed for proper mental, physical, and emotional well-being. But sleeping just 1 to 2 hours less than the recommended 7 in a 24-hour period puts a driver at double the risk for getting into a car crash, according to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. The foundation also reported in a recent study that 1 in 10 US crashes are the result of driver fatigue each year.

And the actual amount of adults getting less than 7 hours of rest per night is high. One in three US adults are not getting enough sleep, according to a recent study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that documented self-reported sleep duration.

"Driving while drowsy" is a dangerous public health concern, just as dangerous as the types of distractions these bills are intended to prohibit—and unnecessarily threatens the lives of everyone on the road.

The issue has slowly gained more national attention. Reducing fatigue-related incidents is on the National Transportation Safety Board's list of 10 "Most Wanted" safety improvements for 2017 – 2018.

Among the most at-risk for drowsy driving include those who work more than 60 hours a week, anyone driving at night, shift workers, and those with an undiagnosed sleep disorder, according to the National Sleep Foundation. Of course, any sleep-deprived person is also at risk for falling asleep behind the wheel.

Drivers who find themselves blinking or yawning frequently, missing their exit, drifting between lanes, or hitting the rumble strips on the side of the road should pull over immediately or switch drivers.

Many of these signs of drowsy driving—missing an exit, drifting between lanes, hitting rumble strips—apply to distracted drivers too. As mentioned above, drivers who take their eyes off the road, even for a few seconds, dramatically increase their likelihood of getting into a crash.

While these statistics draw attention to the alarming prevalence and high-risk nature of drowsy driving, it is a preventable issue, as is distracted driving.



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I emphatically urge people living in every state to put down their devices while driving, for everyone's protection. But let's not stop there. Let's continue to push for awareness of the dangers of both distracted and drowsy driving to make our roads more safe.

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