



## ROAD SAFETY MONITOR 2021: DISTRACTED DRIVING ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES, 2004-2021

*Traffic Injury Research Foundation, June 2022*

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### Introduction

This fact sheet summarizes trends in attitudes and practices related to distracted driving based on data from the Road Safety Monitor (RSM). The RSM is an annual public opinion survey conducted by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) under sponsorship from Beer Canada and Desjardins. The survey takes the pulse of the nation on key road safety issues by means of an online survey of a random, representative sample of Canadian drivers.

The objective of this fact sheet is to examine trends over time and the current status of beliefs and practices related to distracted driving. The increased use of cell phones has led to a growing interest in driver distraction, primarily involving the use of cell phones for texting and talking. It is important to acknowledge, however, that distracted driving is not limited to cell phone use but includes any activity taking the attention of drivers away from the driving task.

### Concern about distracted driving

In 2021, Canadians were asked how concerned they were with drivers using cell phones (either handheld or hands-free), drivers texting messages while driving, and drivers distracted by such things as entertainment systems, vehicle apps, passengers

or eating or drinking. Respondents were asked to rate their degree of concern from 1 (not a problem at all) to 6 (an extremely serious problem); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as being concerned about an issue if they chose five or six.

In 2021, results revealed:

- > 71.4% of respondents were concerned with drivers using cell phones;
- > 81.0% reported concern for drivers texting while driving; and,
- > 57.0% reported concern for drivers distracted by entertainment systems, vehicle apps, passengers or eating or drinking.

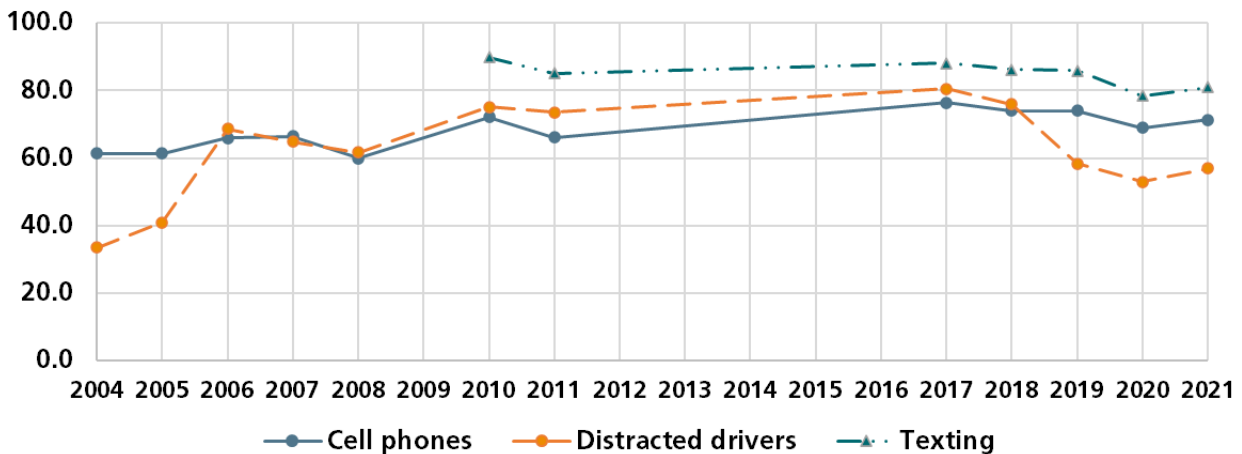
*More than 80% of respondents reported concern about drivers texting while driving.*

The percentage of respondents expressing concern with each issue from 2004 to 2021 is presented in Figure 1. Since not every question was asked each year there are some gaps in the data.<sup>1</sup>

Comparing data from 2004 to 2021, concern related to distracted driving rose dramatically from a low of 33.4% in 2004, peaking in 2017 (80.5%)

<sup>1</sup> None of these questions were asked in 2009 or from 2012 to 2016. The question about texting while driving was first asked in 2010.

**Figure 1: Percentage of respondents concerned about distracted driving**



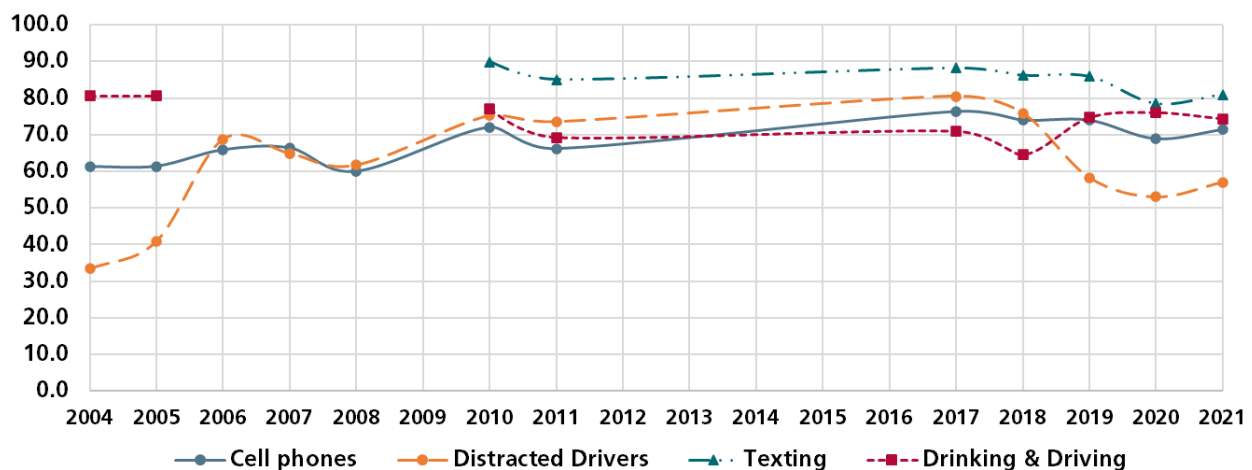
and decreasing substantially to 57.0% in 2021. It is important to note the wording of this question changed from 2005 to 2006 and again from 2018 to 2019.<sup>2</sup> These changes may be reflected in respondents' answers with the rise from 40.9% in 2005 to 68.7% in 2006 and the decrease from 75.9% in 2018 to 58.3% in 2019. Concern related to cell phone use while driving revealed a smaller but significant rise from a low of 61.3% in 2004 to 71.4% in 2021, with a peak of 76.4% in 2017. However, concern about texting has decreased slightly from a high of 89.9% in 2010 to 81.0% in 2021. Although this is the second-lowest percentage since data on this indicator was first collected, concern about texting drivers is still

greater than concern about cell phone use while driving, and concern about drivers being distracted by other sources of distraction.

Of note, there were declines across all indicators from 2017 to 2020, but then each indicator increased slightly in 2021. In the absence of more data points to conduct additional modelling and identify trends, it is important to highlight these subsequent decreases beginning in 2017 may indicate an emerging downward trend in concern about the issue.

To put this issue in context with other road safety issues, concern about distracted driving was compared to self-reported concern about drinking and driving. Figure 2 shows the percentage of

**Figure 2: Percentage of respondents concerned about distracted driving compared to drinking and driving**



<sup>2</sup> In 2004 and 2005 the question read, "drivers distracted by such things as tape decks, CD's or radios." In 2006, this changed to simply, "distracted drivers." In 2019, the question read "drivers distracted by such things as entertainment systems (i.e. radio), vehicle apps, passengers, eating or drinking etc."

respondents expressing concern with drinking and driving for the same years that data were available for distracted driving. Concern about drinking and driving decreased from a high of 80.6% in 2004 to 74.4% in 2021 reaching a low of 64.5% in 2018. When comparing concern about drinking and driving to distracted driving in 2021, concern with texting and driving was greater than drinking and driving. Conversely, concern about cell phone use while driving, and with drivers being distracted by other sources of distraction was lower than for drinking and driving.

### Perceived danger of distracted driving

To gauge Canadians' attitudes about risks associated with distracted driving, respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with various statements regarding cell phone distractions. Specifically, they were asked whether they agreed with the following statements:

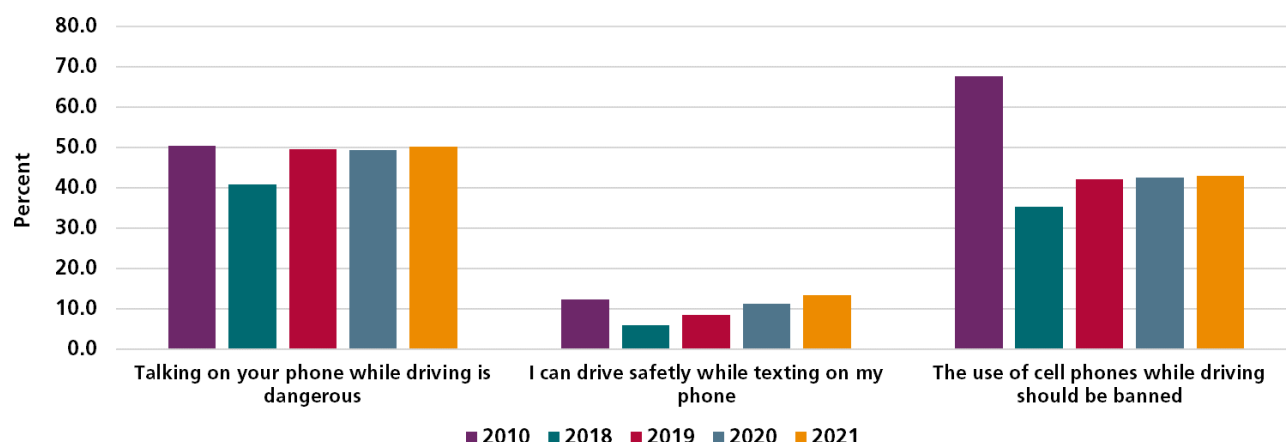
- > Talking on your phone while driving is dangerous regardless of whether you use a handheld or a hands-free device.
- > I can drive safely while texting on my phone.
- > The use of both handheld and hands-free cell phones while driving should be banned.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who agreed with these statements, rated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as agreeing with an issue if they chose a five or six.



Slightly more than half of respondents (50.1%) agreed talking on a handheld or a hands-free device was dangerous and 42.9% agreed the use of cell phones while driving should be banned. Of interest, the percentage of respondents (50.1%) who agreed talking on your phone while driving is dangerous was significantly higher in 2021 compared to 2018, but not significantly different than in 2019. In addition, the percentage of drivers supporting a ban decreased markedly from 2010 when 67.7% agreed phones should be banned. However, the percentage (42.9%) who agreed with a ban in 2021 is a statistically significant increase over 2018 when 35.3% agreed, but it is not significantly different from 2019. Finally, the percentage of respondents who agreed they can drive safely while texting which showed a statistically significant increase from 6% in 2018 to 13.3% in 2021. There was also a significant increase from 2019 (8.4%) to 2021. Of greatest concern, the percentage of respondents who agreed with this statement in 2021 has now surpassed the highest value previously recorded (12.2% in 2010). There was no significant difference between 2021 and 2010.

**Figure 3: Percentage of respondents who agreed with statements regarding distracted driving**



Support for banning the use of cell phones while driving has declined in the past decade, but it has remained stable during the past three years. Perhaps most concerning is the increasing percentage of drivers who think they can safely text while driving during the past three years. Presently, there are approximately as many drivers believing this as in 2010, when this indicator peaked, despite much greater awareness of this issue among drivers today.

Logistic regression modelling was conducted to assess the impacts of sex and age on the likelihood of respondents agreeing that talking on a handheld or hands-free cell phone while driving is dangerous, that they can drive safely while texting, and whether the use of cell phones while driving should be banned. The results for agreement that talking on a cell phone while driving is dangerous revealed males were 2.5% less likely to agree (not statistically significant), while there was a 13.9% increase in the likelihood of agreement for every 10-year increase in age (statistically significant). The results for agreement they can drive safely while texting showed males were 35.0% more likely to agree (not statistically significant) while there was a 32.2% decrease in the likelihood of agreement for every 10-year increase in age (statistically significant). The results for agreement that the use of cell phones should be banned showed males were 24.4% less likely to agree (statistically significant) and there was a 15.7% increase in the likelihood of agreement for every 10-year increase in age (statistically significant).

## Frequency of distracted driving

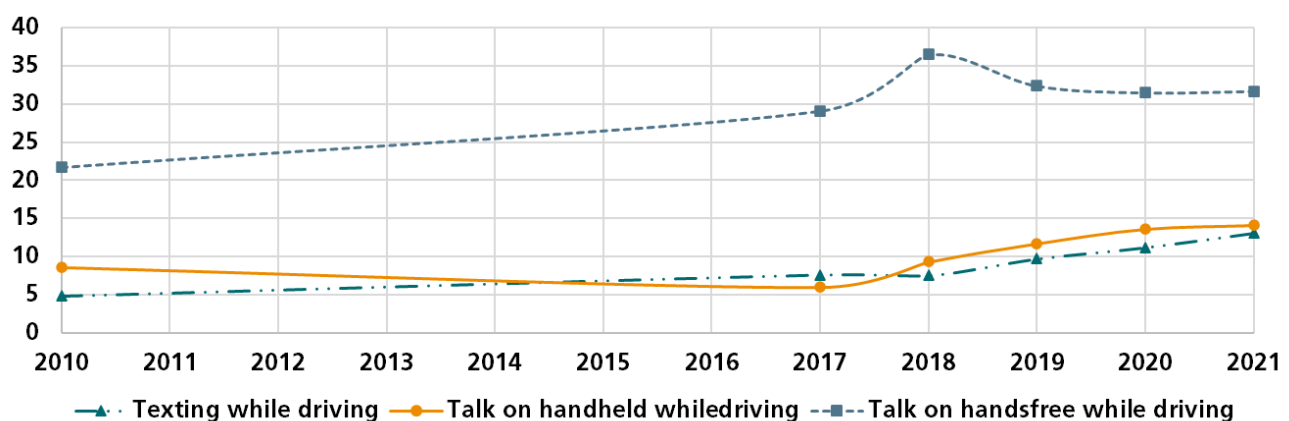
In 2021, Canadians were asked how often they used their cell phones while driving. More specifically, respondents were asked how often they talked on their hands-free phone while driving, how often they talked on their handheld phone while driving, and how often they texted while driving. This question was also asked in 2010, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. Figure 4 plots the responses over time. The questions were asked on a scale from 1 (never) to 6 (very often); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as often engaging in distracted driving activities while driving if they chose a four, five or six.

Results from 2021 revealed 31.7% of respondents reported they often talked on their hands-free phone while driving, 14.1% indicated they often talked on their handheld phone while driving, and 13.1% reported they often texted on their phone while driving. For comparison, in 2010, 21.7% reported they often talked on their hands-free phone while driving (Robertson et al. 2011), a statistically significant difference. Fewer Canadians (8.6%) indicated they often talked on their handheld phone while driving in 2010 compared to 2021 (14.1%).

*A significant 173% increase in the percentage of respondents who reported they often texted on their phone while driving occurred between 2010 and 2021.*

A significant 173% increase in the percentage of respondents who reported they often texted on their phone while driving occurred between 2010 (4.8%)

**Figure 4: Percentage of respondents who engaged in different types of distracted driving**





and 2021 (13.1%). When comparing 2021 to 2019, two behaviours (talking handheld while driving and texting while driving) increased (from 11.7% to 14.1% and from 9.7% to 13.1% respectively) while one (talking hands-free) has decreased (from 32.4% to 31.7%).

Respondents were also asked in 2021 how often they took their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving; 26.2% admitted to doing this often, down slightly from 26.4% in 2019.

Logistic regression modelling was conducted to assess the impacts of sex and age on the likelihood of respondents engaging in these distracted driving behaviours. In all cases, increasing age was associated with a lower likelihood of driving while distracted. For every 10-year increase in age, drivers were:

- > 48.5% less likely to text (statistically significant);
- > 47.6% less likely to use a handheld phone (statistically significant);
- > 29.7% less likely to use a hands-free phone (statistically significant); and,
- > 25.6% less likely to take their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving (statistically significant).

Males were also more likely to do so although results are not always statistically significant. To illustrate, males were:

- > 48.0% more likely to text (not statistically significant);
- > 65.8% more likely to use a handheld phone (statistically significant);
- > 54.2% more likely to use a hands-free phone (statistically significant); and,
- > 46.7% more likely to take their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving (statistically significant).

Similar to findings from our previous fact sheet (c.f., Table 1 in Lyon et al. 2020), older drivers and female drivers were less likely to report these behaviours. However, when considering estimates of the number of drivers engaging in these behaviours on Canadian roads, these practices were common regardless of demographic breakdowns.

To summarize, significantly more Canadians reported talking on their hands-free phone while driving in 2021 compared to 2010. There was a

significant increase of 64.0% from 2010 to 2021 in the percentage of Canadians that reported talking on their handheld phone while driving. In addition, the percentage reporting texting while driving has continued to increase in 2021 compared to 2010, demonstrating a significant increase of 173%. Of greatest concern, those who reported talking on their handheld phone while driving increased every year over the past four years. Similarly, the percentage of Canadians that reported texting while driving also increased in 2019, 2020 and 2021.

## Conclusion

This fact sheet summarizes trends in distracted driving attitudes and practices based on data from TIRF's RSM. Data regarding the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-reported distraction were also collected.

The percentage of drivers concerned about distracted drivers has risen from a low of 33.4% in 2004, peaking in 2017, and decreasing substantially to 57.0% in 2021. Similarly, the concern about cell phone use while driving rose from a low of 61.3% in 2004 to 71.4% in 2021, with a peak in 2017. However, concern about texting while driving has decreased slightly from 89.9% in 2010 to 81.0% in 2021.

The percentage of respondents who agreed talking on your phone while driving is dangerous was consistent over the past three years. Similarly, there has been little change in the percentage of drivers who supported a ban on handheld and hands-free cell phones. Concerningly, drivers who think they can drive safely while texting began to increase over the past three years, surpassing its peak in 2010. These self-report data suggest drivers' comfort level with talking on a cell phone while driving is stable, and they have become increasingly comfortable texting while driving over time. The increase since 2018 suggests more targeted messaging and enforcement are needed to reinforce how risky this behaviour is and to avoid complacency among drivers.

When examining the prevalence of the self-reported distracted driving behaviours, there was a concerning uptick in the percentage of Canadians reporting talking on a handheld device while driving and the percentage reporting texting while driving. The percentages of these two indicators consistently increased in the past four years (to 14.1% and 13.1% respectively). These consecutive

increases are telling and close attention must be paid to them in the coming years to determine if this is the beginning of an upward trend in these behaviours. Additionally, logistic regression modelling demonstrates the likelihood of driving distracted was lower for older drivers and female drivers, but it is important to consider the estimated numbers of Canadian drivers engaging in the behaviour, as it is common regardless of demographic breakdowns.

In conclusion, even though most Canadians appeared to understand texting and driving was indeed dangerous, there was an increasing minority who continued to report this behaviour. Most concerning, this minority has more than doubled in the past decade; and for the second year in a row, the size of this group has significantly surpassed the size of the group of drivers who admitted to driving while over the legal limit for alcohol. This also occurred in 2017 and 2018. Equally concerning, an increasing proportion of Canadians self-reported talking on their handheld phone while driving in 2021, and this proportion has increased every year for the past four years. In light of these consecutive increases, close attention must be paid to these indicators in the future to determine if this pattern continues, possibly indicating the beginning of an upward trend in these behaviours.

### About the poll

These results are based on the RSM, an annual public opinion poll developed and conducted by TIRF. A total of 1,500 Canadians completed the poll in September 2021. Results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 2.5%, 19 times out of 20. The majority of the questions were answered using a scale from one to six where six indicated high agreement, concern, or support and one indicated low agreement, concern or support.

### References

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### Traffic Injury Research Foundation

The vision of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to ensure people using roads make it home safely every day by eliminating road deaths, serious injuries and their social costs. TIRF's mission is to be the knowledge source for safer road users and a world leader in research, program and policy development, evaluation, and knowledge transfer. TIRF is a registered charity and depends on grants, awards, and donations to provide services for the public.

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