

ROAD SAFETY MONITOR 2018: DISTRACTED DRIVING ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES, 2004-2018

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Introduction

This fact sheet summarizes trends in attitudes about, and practices related to, distracted driving, based upon 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 online¹ survey of a random, representative sample of Canadian drivers.

The objective of the publication is to examine trends over time and the current status of beliefs and practices of drivers related to distracted driving. The increased use of cell phones has led to 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 that takes the attention of drivers away from the driving task.

Distracted driving has become one of the most significant road safety concerns worldwide, with mobile devices and other in-vehicle technology being at the forefront of discussion. In North America, distraction is estimated to be a factor in approximately 20% to 30% of motor vehicle collisions (Bowman & Robertson, 2016).

A previous comparison of Canadian drivers' self-reported habits with drivers in the United States and Europe (Woods-Fry et al., 2018) showed Canadians were less likely to report they had talked on a handheld mobile device while driving (25% for Canada, 49.7% for the United States, and 37.8% for Europe). In the same study, a significantly larger proportion of American drivers indicated that they had sent a text message or email while driving compared with Canadian and European drivers (35.3% for the United States, versus 24% for Canada, and 27.2% for Europe). The proportions of those who reported they had read a text message or email while driving were also significantly different (29.4% for Canada, 41.6% for the United States, and 36.4% for Europe), with Canadians reporting the lowest incidence of this behaviour.

Concern about distracted driving

In 2018, Canadians were asked how concerned they were with drivers using cell phones (either handheld or hands-free), distracted drivers and drivers texting messages on their phones while driving. These questions were also asked in previous years. Respondents were asked to rate their concern ranging 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.

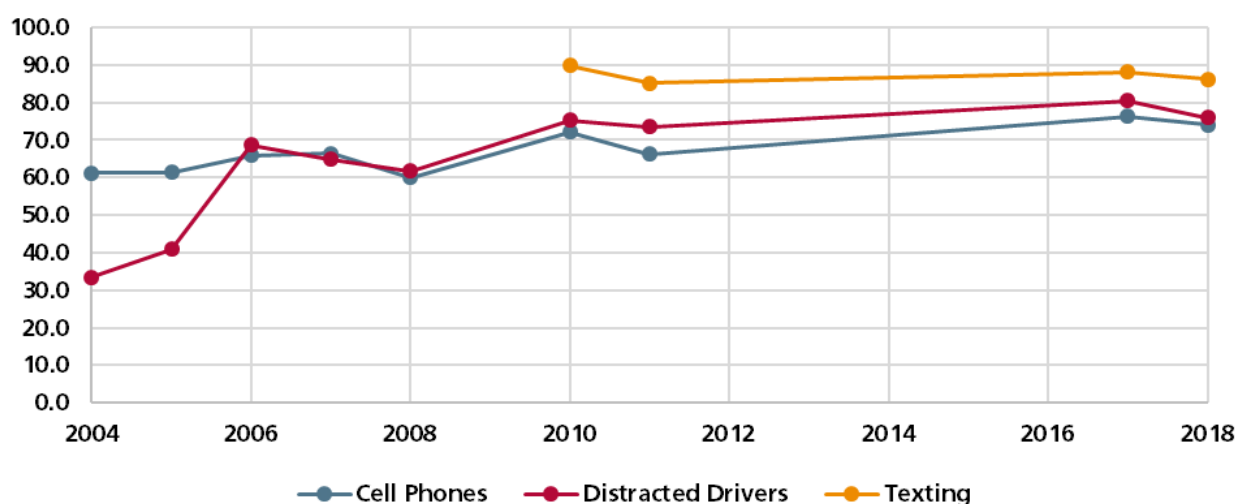
In 2018, results revealed 74% of respondents were concerned with drivers using cell phones, 75.9% reported concern for distracted drivers and 86.2% reported concern for drivers texting while driving.

The percentage of respondents that expressed concern with each issue from 2004 to 2018 is presented in Figure 1. Since not every question was asked each year there are some gaps in the data.²

Comparing trends from 2004 to 2018, concern related to distracted driving has risen dramatically from a low of 33.4% in 2004 to 75.9% in 2018, with a peak of 80.5% in 2017. Note that the wording of this question changed from 2005 to 2006. Specifically, in 2004 and 2005 the question



Figure 1: Percentage of respondents concerned about distracted driving: Canada, 2004-2018



Distracted driving concern has risen dramatically from a low of 33.4% in 2004 to 75.9% in 2018, with a peak of 80.5% in 2017.

read, “drivers distracted by such things as tape decks, CD’s or radios.” In 2006 this changed to simply, “distracted drivers” and this change may be reflected in respondents’ answers with the jump from 40.9% in 2005 to 68.7% in 2006. The results from 2010 to 2018 are statistically different from those prior to 2010.

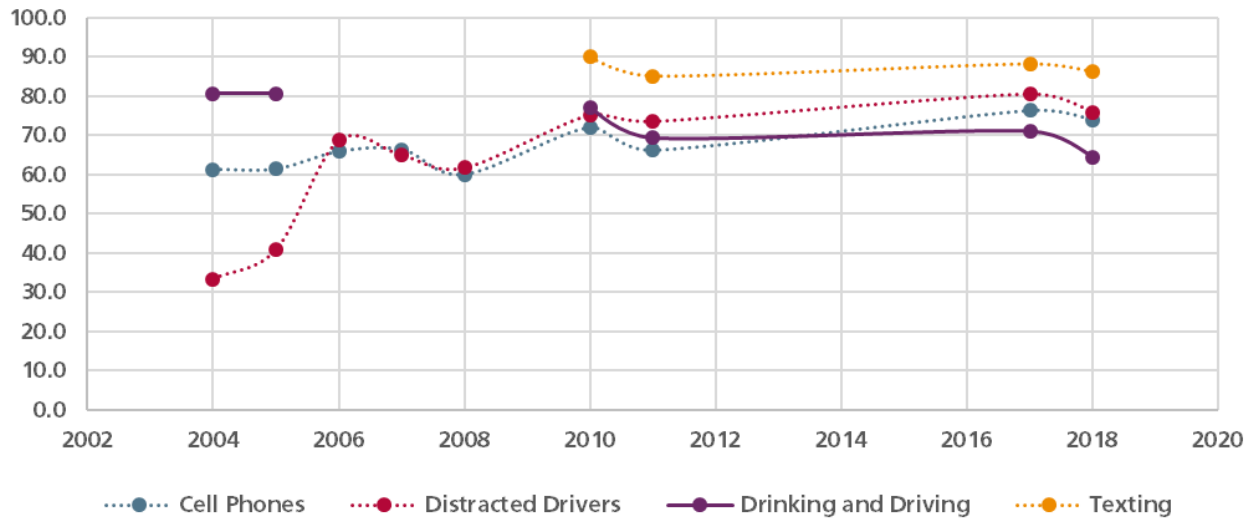
Concern related to cell phone use while driving indicated a smaller but significant rise from a low of 61.3% in 2004 to 74% in 2018 with a high of 76.4% in 2017. The results in 2017 and 2018 are

statistically different from those in previous years, with the exception of 2010.

Concern about texting has decreased slightly from a high of 89.9% in 2010 to 86.2% in 2018 with a low of 85.1% in 2011. During the period from 2010 to 2018, the reported concern regarding the use of cell phones and distracted driving was also more stable, with the largest increases in concern for those issues occurring from 2004 to 2010.

To put distracted driving in context with other road safety issues, concern with distracted driving was compared to the RSM self-reported concern with drinking and driving. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents that expressed concern with drinking and driving for the same years that data were available for distracted driving. Concern for drinking and driving has decreased from a high

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents concerned about distracted driving compared to concern about drinking and driving: Canada, 2004-2018



of 80.6% in 2004 to a low of 64.5% in 2018. The issue of distracted driving is now a greater concern for Canadians although there is still substantial concern with regard to drinking and driving.

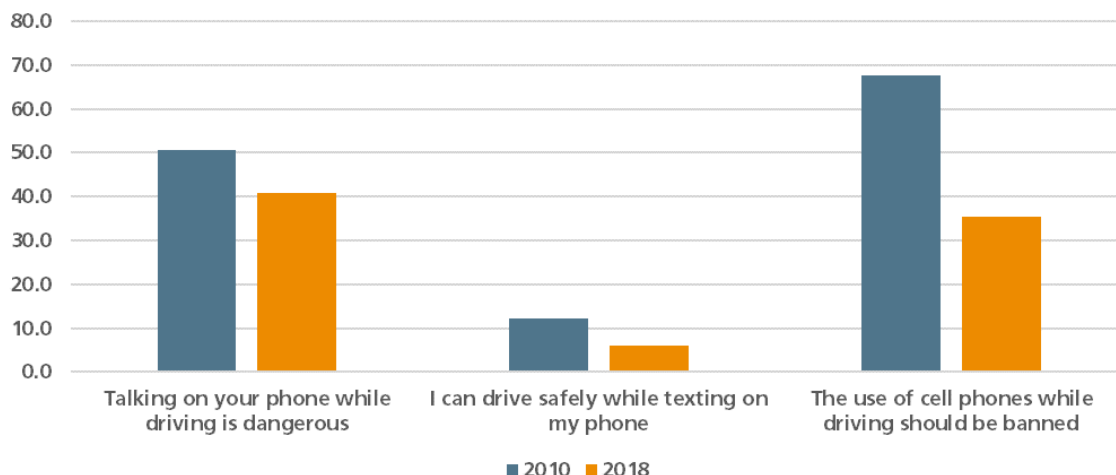
Perceived danger of distracted driving

To gauge Canadians' attitudes towards the risks associated with distracted driving, respondents were asked about the extent to which they agree or disagree with various statements regarding distracted driving due to the use of cell phones while driving. Specifically, they were asked whether they agree with the following statements:

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

Figure 3 shows the percentage of respondents who said they 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.

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



Less than half of respondents, 40.9%, agreed that talking on a handheld or a hands-free device was dangerous and 35.3% agreed that the use of cell phones while driving should be banned. The percentage of drivers that agreed that the behaviour was dangerous and supported a ban has decreased markedly over time with the differences being statistically significant. In 2010, 50.5% agreed that the behaviour was dangerous and 67.7% agreed that they should be banned (Robertson et al., 2011). On the other hand, in 2018 only 6% agreed that they can drive safely while texting on their phone, down from 12.2% who agreed in 2010 (Robertson et al., 2011), a statistically significant decrease. These self-reported data suggest that drivers have become more comfortable using cell phones for talking, but less so for texting while driving over time.



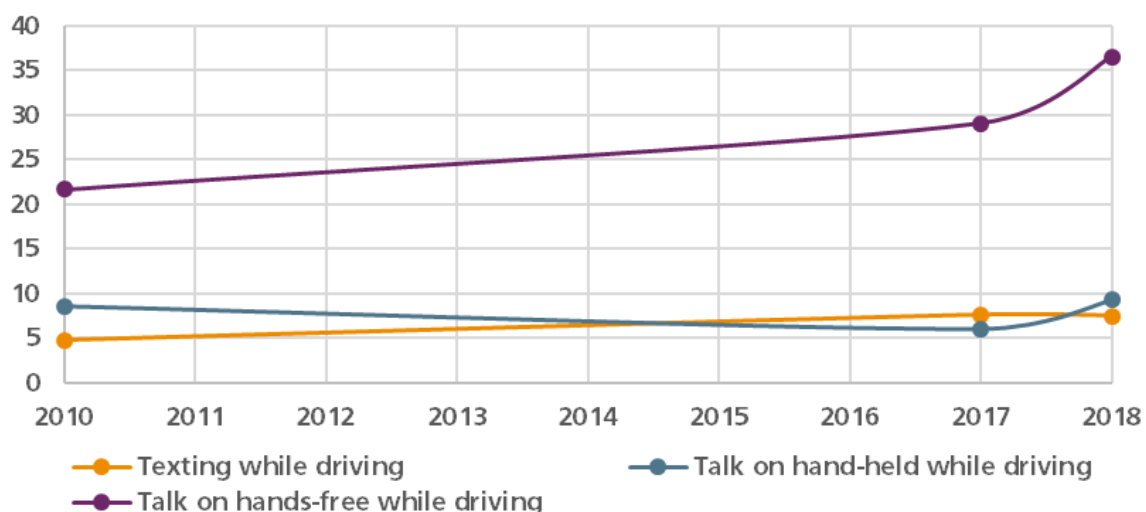
Logistic regression modeling was undertaken to assess the impacts of sex and age on the likelihood of respondents agreeing that talking on a handheld or hands-free cell phone while driving is dangerous. The results showed that females are 31% more likely to agree than males, and there is a 40% increase in the likelihood of agreement for every 10-year increase in age.

Frequency of distracted driving

In 2018, 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 and 2017. 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 2018 revealed that 36.5% of respondents reported that they often talked on their hands-free phone while driving, 9.3% indicated that they often talked on their handheld phone while driving, and 7.5% reported that they often texted on their phone while driving. For comparison, in 2010, 21.7% reported that they often talk on their hands-free phone while driving (Robertson et al. 2011), a statistically significant difference. Roughly the same percentage of Canadians (8.6%) indicated that they often talked

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



on their handheld phone while driving in 2010 compared to 2018 (9.3%). A significant 56% increase in the percentage of respondents who reported that they often texted on their phone while driving occurred between 2010 (4.8%) and 2018 (7.5%).

Respondents were also asked in 2018 how often they took their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving; 28.7% admitted to doing this often.

Logistic regression modeling was undertaken 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:

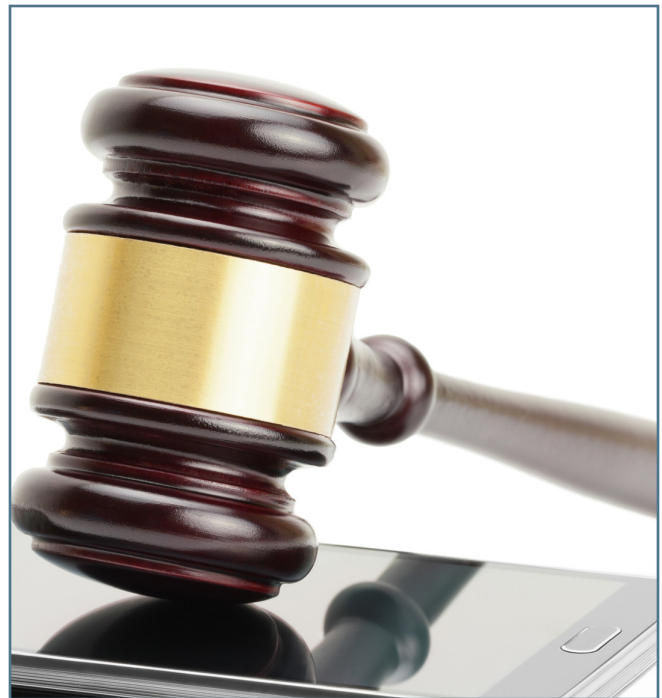
- > 47% less likely to text (significant);
- > 46% less likely to use a handheld phone (significant); and,
- > 22% less likely to use a hands-free phone (significant).

Females were also less likely to do so although results are not always statistically significant. To illustrate, females were:

- > 41% less likely to text (not significant);
- > 40% less likely to use a handheld phone (not significant);
- > 33% less likely to use a hands-free phone (significant); and,
- > 22% less likely to take their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving (not significant).

In sum, significantly more Canadians reported talking on their hands-free phone while driving in 2018 compared to 2010 and 2017. However, there was little difference in the percentage of Canadians that reported talking on their hands-held phone while driving, and a significant increase of 56% in the percentage that reported texting while driving in 2018 compared to 2010. Almost one-third of drivers reported taking their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving.

Between 2018 and 2010, the percentage of respondents that reported texting while driving increased 56%.



In considering trends it should be noted that many jurisdictions have introduced laws banning the use of handheld phones at different points in time. The following laws were passed across the country:

- > Newfoundland and Labrador introduced a ban on handheld phone use and texting while driving in 2003;
- > Quebec and Nova Scotia introduced a ban on handheld phones while driving in 2008;
- > Ontario introduced a ban on handheld phones while driving in 2009;
- > British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Prince Edward Island and Manitoba introduced handheld phone bans in 2010;
- > the Yukon, New Brunswick, and Alberta introduced handheld bans in 2011 (Alberta's law also encompasses other distracted driving activities including reading and writing); and,
- > the Northwest Territories ban on handheld phones while driving was introduced in 2012.

Albeit speculative, such laws and the timing of their introduction may have influenced trends. The effect of such laws, however, has not yet been thoroughly researched. This will have to be further monitored.

Conclusion

This fact sheet summarizes trends in attitudes about and practices related to, distracted driving, based upon data from TIRF's RSM. 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 that distracts drivers from the driving task.

The percentage of drivers concerned about distracted driving has risen dramatically from 33.4% in 2004 to 75.9% in 2018. Concern specifically about cell phone use while driving has risen from 61.3% in 2004 to 74% in 2018; and, concern about texting while driving has decreased slightly from 89.9% in 2010 to 86.2% in 2018.



Less than half of respondents (40.9%) agreed that talking on a handheld or a hands-free device is dangerous and 35.3% agreed that the use of cell phones while driving should be banned. The percentage of drivers agreeing that the behaviour is dangerous and supporting a ban has decreased markedly over time (from 50.5% to 40.9% and from 67.7% to 35.3% respectively). Conversely, in 2018, only 6% agreed that they can drive safely while texting on their phone, down from 12.2% who agreed in 2010. These self-reported data suggest that drivers are becoming more comfortable using cell phones for talking but less comfortable for texting while driving over time.

Females are 31% more likely to agree than males that talking on a phone while driving is dangerous, and there is a 40% increase in the likelihood of agreement for every 10 year increase in age.

Significantly more Canadians reported talking on their hands-free phone while driving in 2018 (36.5%) compared to 2010 (21.7%). However, there was little difference in the percentage of Canadians that reported talking on their handheld phone while driving (9.3% in 2018 versus 8.6% in 2010). Perhaps most concerning, there was a 56% increase in the percentage that reported texting while driving in 2018 (7.5%) compared to 2010 (4.8%) – for a behaviour that can be considered equally impairing as driving under the influence of alcohol with a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of .08%, this level of self-reported driving is alarmingly high. Finally, almost one-third of drivers reported taking their eyes off the road for more than two seconds while driving.

Age was a significant factor in the likelihood of driving while distracted. For every 10 year increase in age, drivers were 47% less likely to text, 46% less likely to use a handheld phone and 22% less likely to use a hands-free phone. Females were also 33% less likely to use a hands-free phone.

For every 10-year increase in age, drivers were 47% less likely to text, 46% less likely to use a handheld phone and 22% less likely to use a hands-free phone.

In conclusion, while most Canadians appear to understand that one of the high-risk forms of distracted driving (i.e., texting while driving) is indeed dangerous, there is a minority who are unaware of, or resistant to, this fact. Most concerning, this minority has increased significantly in the past decade; the size of this group has now surpassed the size of the group of drivers who admit to driving while over the legal limit for alcohol (Brown et al. 2018). Equally concerning, more Canadians self-reported talking on their hands-free phone while driving in 2018 compared to 2010. While this form of distracted driving may be less impairing than texting, it can still place significant cognitive demands on the driver and thereby take away attention from the primary driving task. Given that the road environment

can change in a matter of seconds, all forms of distraction should be avoided so that drivers can focus their complete attention on the driving task at all times.

About the poll

These results are based on the RSM, an annual public opinion poll developed and conducted by TIRF. A total of 1,203 Canadians completed the poll in 2018. Results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 2.8%, 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.

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¹ Prior to 2009 data were collected by means of telephone calls. From 2009 to 2014 data were collected using a combination of telephone calls and online surveys. Since 2014, data have been collected through online surveying only.

² None of these questions were asked in 2009 or from 2012 to 2016. The question pertaining to texting while driving was first asked in 2010.

Traffic Injury Research Foundation

The mission of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to reduce traffic-related deaths and injuries. TIRF is a national, independent, charitable road safety research institute. Since its inception in 1964, TIRF has become internationally recognized for its accomplishments in a wide range of subject areas related to identifying the causes of road crashes and developing programs and policies to address them effectively.

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