Distracted Driving Amendment Development

Stakeholder Questions

Response from the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research, January 2009.

Transportation Safety Services Division

Alberta Transportation

Version 3 (23-Dec-08)
Stakeholder Consultation Questions

Please answer the following questions:

1. **How would you define distracted driving?**
   The ACICR uses the definition of distracted driving described by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation as follows:
   
   Driver distraction is part of the broader category of driver inattention. Whereas inattention refers to any condition, state or event (including being "lost in thought") that causes the driver to pay less attention than required for the driving task, distracted driving occurs “when a driver is delayed in the recognition of information needed to safely accomplish the driving task because some event, activity, object or person… compelled or tended to induce the driver’s shifting attention away from the driving task” (Treat 1980, p. 21).
   
   (Beirness et al., 2002, pg. )

   What distinguishes distracted driving from inattentive driving is the presence of a specific event or activity that triggers the distraction.

2. **What do you think distracts drivers from the task of driving?**
   Numerous events and activities both inside and outside of the vehicle can distract a driver’s attention. Some may be transient, temporary distractions that are difficult to predict or control (e.g., an unusual event along the roadside, a loose object moving inside the vehicle, a sudden noise); others may be more prolonged distractions that are engaged in voluntarily (e.g., selecting and changing a CD, making or receiving a cell phone call; programming a navigation device). Any event that interferes with a driver’s attention to the driving task has the potential to cause the driver to miss or delay their recognition of, or reaction to, a critical event in the environment, which may result in a collision.

2. **Which driver distractions do you think occur most commonly?**
   Some of the other most common driver distractions recorded in the Crashworthiness Data System maintained by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA 2001) include:
   
   - other occupants in vehicle;
   - moving object inside vehicle;
   - adjusting climate controls;
   - adjusting radio, cassette, CD;
   - using other device in vehicle;
   - outside person, object or event;
   - eating or drinking; and,
   - smoking related activity.
Please consider the following four scenarios for questions 4 and 5:

i. It is an offence to drive while [restricted activities: e.g., use a hand-held communications device, eat, attend to personal grooming, etc.]

ii. It is an offence to drive while [restricted activities] if there is evidence that driving is adversely affected.

iii. It is an offence to drive while distracted. [The definition of distracted driving would be broad and general to allow applicability for unique situations based on officers’ discretion.]

iv. It is an offence to drive while distracted if there is evidence that driving is adversely affected. [The definition of distracted driving would be broad and general to allow applicability for unique situations based on officers’ discretion.]

3. What, if any, activities would you restrict under scenarios (i) and (ii)?

Those who use cell phones while driving have been found to have slower reaction times and other decreases in driving performance. Attention and performance decrements have also been reported across various age groups and for the type of conversation (simple vs. complex, relaxed vs. intense). Despite hands-free devices, reaction time is not significantly different compared to hand-held cell phones, and reaction times for hand-held and hands-free devices are significantly slower than when not using a cell phone. Research has also shown that the use of hands-free cell phones negatively affect both older and younger drivers. (Strayer et al., 2001, Alm and Nilsson, 1994, Alm and Nilsson, 1995, Hendrick and Switzer, 2007, Strayer and Drews, 2004, Beede and Kass, 2006, Matthews et al., 2003). Given this research, use of cell phones, both hand-held and hands-free, should be restricted under scenario (i).

There is less research to show that other types of in-vehicle distractions cause performance decrements for all drivers to the level that cell phones do. As such, use of other devices such as navigation equipment or audio entertainment would be best handled under scenario (ii).

Other common distractions such as interactions with other occupants of the vehicle, moving objects within the vehicle, climate controls, eating, drinking or smoking are best handled under scenario (iv). This scenario would allow for all types of dangerous behaviours to be covered if it appears to the enforcement officer that the activity is impairing the ability to drive safely.
4. **What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of the four scenarios?**

Use of scenarios (i), (ii), and (iv) would cover all distractions and limit the use of those that are proven to have the ability to cause performance decrements. Given the use of these three scenarios, scenario (iii) seems redundant and unnecessary.

5. **What would be a reasonable monetary fine for distracted driving?**

Follow the link to view current fines: [Alberta Quick Reference, Offences and Penalties under the Traffic Safety Act and Regulations](#)

A reasonable monetary fine for distracted driving would depend on the degree of distraction and its impact on the operation of the vehicle. It should range from $402 which is equivalent to careless driving to $172 which is equivalent to the fine for permitting a person/animal or thing to impede the safe operation of a vehicle.

6. **Should drivers convicted of distracted driving be subject to demerits? If so, how many?** Follow the link to view current demerits (see bottom of the page): [Demerit Point Schedule](#)

Yes, drivers convicted of distracted driving should be subject to demerits as demerits are more effective than fines for changing habitual unsafe driving practices. The demerits should once again depend on the degree of the distraction and its impact on the operation of the vehicle. Demerits should range from 3 which is equivalent to stunting to 6 which is equivalent to careless driving.

7. **If a cell phone ban was in place, should any of the following exemptions exist?**

   a) enforcement officers
   b) fire-fighters
   c) paramedics
   d) drivers experiencing a medical emergency
   e) drivers requiring 911 assistance
   f) others: ____________________________

Categories a), b), and c) should be exempt from a cell phone ban because they are professional drivers who already have special driving privileges and they can undergo training during which they can learn to safe use of a cell phone while driving. Drivers in category d) and e) should also be exempt from a cell phone ban to avoid unintended negative consequences that not using a cell phone may cause.
8. Are you aware of any technology (current or future) that may help tackle the complex issue of distracted driving in Alberta? If yes, what are the pros and cons of using such technology?

Donmez, B., Boyle, L.N., Lee, J.D., 2007. Safety implications of providing real-time feedback to distracted drivers. Accident Analysis & Prevention 39 (3), 581–590. In this article the authors discuss the potential benefits of a mechanism which alerts drivers to their distracted state when using an in-vehicle information system. Research into this area is fairly new and more is required before a thorough assessment of its value can be made.

9. Is there any merit in a unique GDL condition related to distracted driving? If so, what should it address?

Clearly new, young drivers are distracted by peer-aged passengers (e.g. Heck et al., 2008). Other distractions can also ‘over-load’ new drivers:

> Early in the learning process novices are awkward, inept, and often inhibited by their own extraneous actions. Presenting such individuals with any additional information, sometimes even instructions, can induce immediate overload and even panic.
> (Hancock, et al. 2003, pg. 502)

As such, restrictions designed to reduce distractions in the initial months of the probationary phase of driving would be protective of new drivers and allow them to gain more skills in a control situation prior to taking on more complex tasks.

A restriction on peer-aged passengers for new young drivers should be implemented for the initial portion of the probationary phase of driving. Also requiring new drivers to pull safely off the road to use in-car devices such as navigation and audio entertainment would also be protective.
References


