



BRSI

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Summary

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Meesmann, U. & Opdenakker, E. (2013). *Comportements détournant l'attention chez les conducteurs professionnels*. Bruxelles, Belgique: Institut Belge pour la Sécurité Routière – Centre de connaissance Sécurité Routière.

Summary

The BRSI (Belgian Road Safety Institute) carried out a literature study on distracted behaviour among professional drivers. The aim of this research project is to provide a scientific basis for recommendations on measures to combat distracted behaviour among professional drivers and among bus drivers in particular. We mapped out the problem of distracted behaviour among (professional) drivers - looking at the use of mobile phones and headphones in particular - and the existing measures to cope with this phenomenon.

The literature lacks a clear and consistently-used formal definition of what constitutes distracted driving. Moreover, it is closely associated with concepts such as inattention and fatigue. It is often defined as what happens when attention shifts to activities other than the actions and manoeuvres that are critical to ensure safe driving and can be broken down into four different types: visual, cognitive, physical and auditory distraction. These have an impact on a number of essential aspects of driving ability and can for example lead to reduced control of the vehicle, slower reactions, reduced speed or overlooking things because one's thoughts are elsewhere.

Research reveals that a large number of drivers do things that can distract them. Studies show that drivers spend an estimated 30% of their time behind the wheel carrying out distracting activities. Distractions play a role in around 5 to 25% of all road accidents, although it is difficult to prove a causal link between the two. The ETSC (European Transport Safety Council) (2010) estimates this percentage to be even higher (20-30%). However, findings on the relative impact of different forms of distraction do not provide an unequivocal indication.

With regard to the use of a mobile phone while driving, we determine that 1 to 10% of drivers always use a mobile phone while driving and that 60 to 70% admit to doing so occasionally. The figure for hands-free use of mobile phones is probably even higher. Several surveys indicate that male drivers under the age of 30 show more signs of this type of distracted behaviour than other age groups or women. There is not much information available regarding the extent of sending text messages while driving, but it is estimated that 27 to 60% of drivers send text messages while driving. These are primarily young drivers: 58% of drivers aged 17 to 29 regularly read text messages and 37% regularly send text messages while driving.

Using a mobile phone can lead to different types of distracted behaviour, but cognitive distraction where concentration is distracted by thoughts other than the primary task of driving - has the biggest influence on driving behaviour. The complexity of driving conditions, as well as that of the conversation itself, plays an important role in defining the extent of the danger caused by the distraction. We observed that the frequent use of a mobile telephone by young drivers can increase the risk of an accident considerably. It can be presumed that the relative lack of driving experience among young drivers can make them even more susceptible to the impact of distractions. However, we also noted an increased risk of accidents among other drivers when using mobile phones. This applies to everyone irrespective of gender, age and driving experience. Moreover, we did not observe any difference in the risks associated with hand-held versus hands-free mobile phone utilisation while driving. This leads us to suspect that the cognitive distraction caused by phone conversations is the most important factor.

In addition to young drivers, the research suggests that professional drivers are also particularly susceptible to the effects of being distracted as they often have to carry out several functions while driving. And yet, professional drivers - based on their involvement in accidents - seem to be less susceptible to being distracted. This may be explained by a lower general prevalence of distracted behaviour among professional drivers than among normal drivers. Furthermore, this seems to apply to a small group of high-risk drivers. It also seems that physical and visual distractions play a greater role among professional drivers. Finally, surveys reveal that sending text messages is extremely risky for professional drivers.

To date, measures to combat distracted driving have rarely been evaluated. As a result, it is difficult to make specific recommendations with regard to measures to combat distracted driving and so a combination of approaches would seem to be a good solution. These may be regulatory, educational or technological in nature.

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The most common regulatory measure is the ban on using a hand-held phone while driving a motorised vehicle. In Belgium, this ban is set out in article 8.4 of the Traffic Regulations. General regulations are in force in Belgium as well as in just about all other countries prohibiting reckless and dangerous driving based on which distracted driving can be punished. A legal ban may bring about a short-term change in behaviour, but this effect disappears with time and intensive and continuous enforcement is necessary to guarantee long-term effectiveness. Moreover, it is very difficult to enforce the use of mobile phones and other sources of distraction.

Information campaigns play an important role in raising awareness about regulations and their enforcement, but also in making drivers aware of the risks of distracted driving. These types of campaigns only have a limited influence on driving behaviour, however. Furthermore, it is important to properly inform drivers of potential distractions while driving and teach them how to deal with this phenomenon: this may take the form of driving classes after a traffic violation or other educational initiatives to teach drivers appropriate driving behaviour.

Various electronic devices have also been developed to simplify the task of driving or warn of dangerous situations and thus increase driver safety in general. Although the impact of these systems is not yet known, they may help prevent distracted driving in the future. A combination of these measures should be used when organisations want to set up an effective policy governing the use of mobile phones and headphones. Employers can also influence the driving habits of their employees. Road safety is after all a shared responsibility and organisations must also play a role. A large number of organisations around the world have already implemented specific safety policies governing the use of mobile phones, the majority of which only ban handheld operation.

It is important that the efforts made to combat distracted driving are integrated into a general safety culture within organisations, and in transport companies in particular. Several recommendations have been drawn up in this context, the main ones being: clear internal regulations with permanent enforcement, regular communications via different channels and training programmes, clear reminders about internal regulations in the event of a violation and during performance interviews, continuous monitoring and evaluation of the problem, delaying service provision, taking sufficient breaks and carrying out further research.



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