

UPCOMING TRAININGS & CONFERENCES

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NDA A's Human Trafficking and the Impact on Commercial Driver's Licenses/On Demand Training

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NDA A's 2026 Retail Crime Conference (CLE Eligible)

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NDA A's 2026 Homicide Conference (CLE Eligible)

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NDA A's 2026 Leadership Academy (CLE Eligible)

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RESOURCES

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CDL-Related Resources

► ndaa.org/cdl

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Distracted Driving in the CMV Industry: New Challenges, New Tools

*By Emily Moorhead, Writer-Editor,
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In 2018, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a 28-year-old semitruck driver was using his cellphone to research houses for sale—while driving. He looked at his phone for eight seconds while going 63 miles per hour, traveling a distance of about 740 feet, as far as the Golden Gate Bridge is tall. While distracted by his research, he slammed into a passenger vehicle and killed the occupant, who was a husband, father and local professor. The driver was sentenced to one year in jail, 10 years of probation and a suspended commercial driver's license (CDL).

Distracted driving isn't always this extreme. And part of what makes it so dangerous is that it is so commonplace. Commercial motor vehicle (CMV) and passenger vehicle drivers alike are often distracted by things like changing music, helping little passengers in the back seat, unwrapping a fast food burger, rubbernecking

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at a crash or sending a “quick text.” And often, nothing bad happens. Maybe you get too close to the person in front of you and have to apply your brakes a little more forcefully than normal. Maybe you get a spike of adrenaline, put down your phone and vow to pay more attention next time. But just because it happens frequently and to nearly everyone who has driven a vehicle doesn’t mean that distracted driving is something society must accept instead of solve.

What Is Distracted Driving?

While there are various definitions of distracted driving from different safety focused agencies, it is commonly defined as a driver’s attention being diverted from driving by a secondary task that requires focusing on an object, event or person not related to the driving task. The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and Transport Canada provide examples of distracting activities, such as talking or texting on your phone; eating or drinking; talking to people in your vehicle; or fiddling with the stereo, entertainment or navigation system.

Let’s take a look at recent studies on distracted driving across all vehicle types and CMVs specifically.

- According to NHTSA, distracted driving (all vehicle types) claimed 3,275 lives in 2023, and an additional 289,310 people were injured.
- In 2022, distracted driving (all vehicle types) was a contributing factor in 19.9% of fatal collisions in Canada.
- Drivers who use their phone behind the wheel (all vehicle types) are 240% more likely to crash, according to a 2025 study by the Governors Highway Safety Association.
- 22.4% of drivers in Mexico (all vehicle types) admitted to using a handheld cellphone while driving, even though 96.8% of those surveyed identified this as a high risk behavior, according to a study titled “It’s okay because I’m just driving”: an exploration of self-reported mobile phone use among Mexican drivers.
- A 2009 Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) study found that 71% of large-truck crashes occurred when the truck driver was doing something other than driving.
- A 2021 study by Omnitricks found that truck drivers who are distracted by mobile phones are three times more likely to exceed the speed limit by 10+ miles per hour.
- An FMCSA and Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) study showed that, compared to personal motorists, CMV drivers are 23 times more likely to cause a crash while texting at the wheel, seven times more likely when reaching for an electronic device and six times more likely when dialing a phone.
- According to the FMCSA Large Truck and Bus Crash Facts report, in 2021, distraction or inattention was the second most common large truck driver-related crash factor, accounting for 278 fatal crashes.

Just because it happens frequently and to nearly everyone who has driven a vehicle doesn’t mean that distracted driving is something society must accept instead of solve.

Distracted driving can be deadly, and it’s clear that this problem runs deep in our society. There is some good news, though. Between government agencies, nonprofit organizations like CVSA, researchers and the motor carrier industry, many parties are committed to getting to the bottom of the problem of distracted CMV driving and promoting safety, preventing crashes and saving lives. Agencies are embracing creative enforcement campaigns and partnerships to curb device use behind the wheel, while carriers are turning to telematics and in-cab monitoring to address the problem from within and as part of ongoing training.

Types and Sources of Distractions

Distractions are everywhere, and they can come from inside or outside the cab. Distractions outside the cab can include looking at a passing building, billboard or person. A three-year data-collection effort by FMCSA and NHTSA found that an estimated 11,000 U.S. large-truck crashes involved distractions external to the truck cab. Distractions inside the cab can include dialing cellphones, texting, using dispatching devices, eating, reaching for items in the cab, reading or adjusting the radio. When you get down to it, anything that takes the driver away from the driving task is a distraction.

Types of Distraction

- **Visual Distraction**—Not looking at the road or other vehicles while driving
- **Cognitive Distraction**—Mental attention not focused on driving
- **Manual Distraction**—Removing hands from the steering wheel to reach for a cellphone, food/drink, etc.
- **Delayed Reaction**—Not being able to stop in time to avoid a collision due to distractions

A 2006 study found that driver inattention was the leading factor in crashes and near crashes. The study found that nearly 80% of crashes involved some form of driver inattention in the three seconds before the crash or near-crash.

Texting while driving is one of the most dangerous forms of distracted driving because it combines visual, manual and cognitive distractions all at once. A 2006 University of Utah study shows that the impairments associated with using a cellphone while driving can be as profound as those associated with driving while impaired.

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Emerging Technologies

Motor carriers are embracing emerging technology to gather data, recognize patterns, provide driver alerts and interrupt distraction before crashes occur. This includes AI-powered, driver-facing cameras that detect phone use or fatigue. These systems, combined with telematics and advanced driver-assistance systems, provide real-time alerts and data for driver coaching.

- **AI-Powered Dash Cameras:** AI dashcams are advanced vehicle cameras that use artificial intelligence to analyze road conditions and driver behavior in real time, enhancing safety through proactive alerts. They typically feature dual-facing cameras (road and cabin) to detect risks, such as drowsiness, tailgating and cellphone use, often connecting to cloud services for fleet management and video evidence. They can also detect when a driver's eyes are off the road, when they are looking at a phone or when they exhibit signs of fatigue. They can trigger immediate, in-cab audio alerts and record events for coaching.
- **Telematics and Driver Monitoring:** Telematics and driver monitoring systems combine GPS, onboard diagnostics and sensors to track vehicle location and driving behavior in real time. These systems, which may integrate with AI-powered dashcams, enhance safety by identifying risks like speeding, erratic steering, tailgating, and harsh acceleration and braking, which often correlate with distractions.
- **Coaching and Behavior Analytics:** Data from cameras and sensors allow managers to identify high-risk drivers, offering targeted training to improve safety habits. In addition, these systems can provide real-time, audible alerts to the driver, often using voice coaching to correct behavior immediately rather than just recording it.
- **Forward Collision Mitigation:** These systems use cameras and sensors to monitor the road and issue warnings when a driver is following too closely, a risk often caused by inattention.

- **Predictive Fatigue Monitoring:** Beyond detecting closed eyes, new technology uses wearable sensors and smartphone-based tests to measure driver alertness. Some systems analyze hours-of-service logs to create a “fatigue score” that updates every 15 minutes, allowing managers to intervene before safety is compromised.
- **Mobile Device-Blocking Technology:** While “do not disturb” and “driving mode” functions have existed for quite some time and can be toggled on and off by the user, mobile device-blocking technology does not require user cooperation. These solutions actively prevent the use of apps, texting and calling while the vehicle is in motion, while often allowing for emergency calls. The mandatory use of this technology has been highly controversial due to debates over safety, privacy, personal freedom and effectiveness.

Governmental Agency Programs

Government agencies across North America are addressing distracted driving among passenger vehicle and CMV drivers via regulations and educational and enforcement programs.

United States

Several U.S. agencies are at the forefront of addressing distracted driving. NHTSA not only addresses distracted driving in passenger vehicles but also conducts research to better understand the prevalence of this issue and how to address it. This year, during a portion of Distracted Driving Awareness Month, from April 10–14, agencies across the U.S. increased their roadway presence as part of the national paid media campaign “Put the Phone Away or Pay.” This campaign reminds drivers of the deadly dangers and legal consequences—including fines—of using a hand-held mobile device while driving.

As the primary agency for preventing CMV related crashes, injuries and fatalities, FMCSA has strong policies and programs in place for addressing distracted driving. Title 49 Code of Federal Regulations prohibits texting and driving in § 392.80—Prohibition against texting and § 392.82—Using a hand held mobile telephone. An FMCSA final rule imposes sanctions for driver offenses, including civil penalties up to \$2,750 and driver disqualification for multiple offenses. Motor carriers are also prohibited from requiring or allowing their drivers to text or use a hand-held mobile phone while driving and may be subject to civil penalties up to \$11,000. In addition, violations will impact Safety Measurement System (SMS) results. Texting and calling on a hand-held phone carry the maximum violation severity weighting in SMS.

FMCSA addresses driver distraction in its “Our Roads, Our Safety” campaign and the FMCSA Driver Safety Program. “Our Roads, Our Safety” is a national campaign designed to educate all road users—drivers, cyclists and pedestrians—on how to safely share the road with large trucks and buses. The distracted driving portion of this campaign features resources for motor carriers, drivers and the public, and the full distracted driving toolkit can be accessed at www.fmcsa.dot.gov/ourroads/distracted-driving-awareness-resources.

The FMCSA Driver Safety Program is one result of a study conducted in coordination with VTTI. It aims to address “driver error,” which is a primary contributing factor in up to 87% of large-truck crashes. [See table on page 5 of this article.] The University of California San Diego Transportation Research and Education for Driving Safety also has a distracted driving course. These programs address driver distraction, failure to buckle up, driving too fast for conditions, unfamiliar roadways, inadequate surveillance, driver fatigue, driving too closely, inadequate evasive action and more.

See the sidebar [on page 6] of this article for distracted driving tips from the FMCSA Driver Safety Program, and read more at www.fmcsa.dot.gov/safety/driver-safety/cm-v-driving-tips-driver-distraction and www.fmcsa.dot.gov/driver-safety/distracted-driving.

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Looking Ahead

Distracted driving is a complex problem that is deeply ingrained in our society. And when CMV drivers are distracted, the results can be catastrophic and deadly. The severity of this issue is not going unnoticed, however. Tech developers, the motor carrier industry, researchers, government agencies and organizations like CVSA all play a part in solving this pervasive problem. From the technologies used in truck cabs to impactful statistics and public service announcements to enforcement campaigns and outreach, many different parties are putting in the work to educate the public and end distracted driving.

Next time you're at the wheel and you're tempted to pick up your phone, reach into the back seat or eat a snack, remember that anything that distracts from the driving task is distracted driving, and it only takes seconds for tragedy to occur.

Drivers of Large Trucks in Fatal Crashes by Distraction-Related and Impairment-Related Factors, 2018-2020

DRIVER DISTRACTION-RELATED FACTORS	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Inattentive, Details Unknown	95	2.0%	95	1.9%	99	2.1%
Distracted, Details Unknown	16	0.3%	27	0.5%	39	0.8%
Distracted by Outside Person, Object or Event	16	0.3%	21	0.4%	22	0.5%
Distraction/Inattention	32	0.7%	27	0.5%	14	0.3%
Other Distraction	18	0.4%	11	0.2%	13	0.3%
Talking or Listening to Cellular Phone	15	0.3%	12	0.2%	13	0.3%
Other Cellular Phone Related	10	0.2%	16	0.3%	11	0.2%
Using or Reaching For Device/Object Brought Into Vehicle	11	0.2%	17	0.3%	9	0.2%
Eating or Drinking	7	0.1%	8	0.2%	9	0.2%
Dialing/Manipulating Cellular Phone**	7	0.1%	8	0.2%	8	0.2%
Lost In Thought/Day Dreaming	1	*	2	*	3	0.1%
Adjusting Audio and/or Climate Controls	2	*	0	0.0%	2	*
Using Other Device/Controls Integral to Vehicle	6	0.1%	0	0.0%	2	*
Distracted By Other Occupant(s)	2	*	5	0.1%	1	*
Careless/Inattentive	12	0.2%	4	0.1%	1	*
Distracted By Moving Object in Vehicle	2	*	2	*	1	*
Distraction/Careless	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	*
Looked But Did Not See	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Smoking Related	1	*	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
At Least One Driver Distraction-Related Factor Recorded	253	5.2%	255	5.1%	248	5.2%
No Driver Distraction-Related Factors Recorded	4,579	94.8%	4,722	94.9%	4,529	94.8%
Total	4,832	100.0%	4,977	100.0%	4,777	100.0%
DRIVER IMPAIRMENT-RELATED FACTORS	2018		2019		2020	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Under the Influence of Alcohol, Drugs or Medication	111	2.3%	94	1.9%	121	2.5%
Asleep or Fatigued	62	1.3%	72	1.4%	68	1.4%
Ill, Blackout	22	0.5%	33	0.7%	34	0.7%
Emotional (Depressed, Angry, Disturbed, etc.)	5	0.1%	17	0.3%	11	0.2%
Physical Impairment – No Details	11	0.2%	13	0.3%	10	0.2%
Other Physical Impairment	9	0.2%	5	0.1%	5	0.1%
Blind	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	*
Deaf	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
Impaired Due to Previous Injury	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%
At Least One Driver Impairment-Related Factor Recorded	220	4.6%	234	4.7%	250	5.2%
No Driver Impairment-Related Factors Recorded	4,612	95.4%	4,743	95.3%	4,527	94.8%
Total	4,832	100.0%	4,977	100.0%	4,777	100.0%

This table was published by FMCSA using data from NHTSA.

*Less than 0.05%.

**"Dialing/Manipulating Cellular Phone" combines two separate driver distraction-related factors: "Dialing Cellular Phone" and "Manipulating Cellular Phone."

Anti-Distraction Tips for Drivers from the FMCSA Driver Safety Program

- **Do not let objects outside the cab distract you.** Stay focused on driving and avoid distractions, like billboards, buildings and people.
- **Don't text and drive.** If you are driving at 55 mph and take your eyes off the road for five seconds to write a text, you will travel the length of a football field without looking at the road. A 2009 study found that texting while driving increased a driver's risk of being involved in a safety-critical event by 23 times.
- **Don't use a dispatching device while driving.** Although these devices can be helpful in many ways, dispatching devices can take your eyes, hands and mind away from driving safely. A 2009 study found that using a dispatching device while driving increased the chances of a safety-critical event by nine times.
- **Don't dial a handheld phone while driving.** Dialing a handheld cellphone takes your eyes off the road and your hands off the wheel. Instead, find a safe place to stop and dial, or use a voice-activated hands-free phone or app. A 2011 study found that drivers who were dialing a handheld cellphone made more frequent and larger steering corrections than drivers talking on a hands-free device.
- **Don't read, write or use paper maps while driving.** Printed directions, notes and maps are a normal part of a professional driver's job, but these tasks take your eyes off the road. If you need to read or write something, pull over. Voice-activated GPS units are much safer to use while driving than maps.
- **Avoid eating and drinking while driving.** Eating while driving can take your eyes off the road and requires at least one hand off the wheel. Always try to eat or drink before getting behind the wheel or leave time to pull over and eat. In May 2008 in Wisconsin, a CMV driver crashed into the back of a stopped school bus, which had its lights flashing and stop arm out. The CMV driver, distracted by drinking a soda, did not see the school bus. Fourteen children were taken to the hospital, four with serious injuries. The CMV driver was transported to the hospital in critical condition.

About the Author

Emily is a writer-editor at the Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance (CVSA), a position she has held since joining the organization in January 2023. She is responsible for CVSA's magazine, *Guardian*, and also provides additional writing and editing support for the organization, including certification course materials. Emily has more than a decade of experience in marketing, communications, advertising and social media. She holds a bachelor's degree in public relations from Westminster College in Pennsylvania.



Be on the lookout for "Prosecuting Distracted Driving Cases,"

a new curriculum developed by the National Traffic Law Center, in conjunction with the National Distracted Driving Coalition and the Traffic Injury Research Foundation.

Once it is released, it will be a great source of information for prosecutors handling these cases. Keep an eye on our website, www.ndaa.org/national-traffic-law-center, for more information.