

Direct Line & Brake Reports on Safe Driving

In-vehicle distraction



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direct line

Brake asked 1,009 drivers questions about in-vehicle distractions. The survey was carried out online in October 2019 by independent market research company, SurveyGoo.

While it is imperative for a driver to focus on the outside environment to ensure they can safely complete their journey, distractions in the vehicle can end up being the cause of many collisions on our roads.

Our reliance on our mobile phones and their apps has meant that, even though driving can account for only a small percentage of someone's day, many find it hard to leave these devices alone while at the wheel. The findings from Brake's survey into in-vehicle distractions are deeply concerning; it is incredible that 4% of drivers - the equivalent of more than 1.5 million licence holders - think it is not at all distracting to message or text on a hand-held device while in control of a vehicle. This is only slightly fewer than those who believe talking on a handheld phone while driving does not cause a distraction (5%).

One can assume these are more or less the same people, and it demonstrates the existence of a core minority of people who refuse to adhere to the law. Even more worrying is that 16% of drivers admitted that they have texted or messaged on a device while driving and 3% of drivers do it on every journey. This means there are more than a million vehicles on the roads every day with a driver texting or messaging someone.

Even the use of hands-free devices is distracting and will put road users in danger. While legal to use, anyone in control of a vehicle should never take the risk of making a hands-free call. Until we begin to reduce the reliance on our mobile devices it is difficult to see how drivers would change their behaviours, even through changes in the law.

As we can see from handheld devices, even with increased penalties and a greater awareness of the dangers and consequences, there is still a large minority of drivers on the UK roads who continue to defy the law and put themselves and others at risk on a daily basis.



direct line

Stephen Barrett

Head of direct motor training
Direct Line Car Insurance



Each time a driver gets behind the wheel they complete a complex and mentally demanding task. While experienced drivers may feel that driving is relatively automatic and needs little thought, research has shown that driving requires focused attention. Nevertheless, this feeling of ease could explain why some drivers feel able to carry out other tasks behind the wheel, such as using a phone. The idea that we have 'spare' attention when driving is a fallacy, yet an increasing amount of technology is present in our vehicles.

Some of this technology is designed to reduce the demands drivers face (e.g. speed limiters, park-assist and automatic braking systems). But while this technology could improve safety, it also risks making drivers disengage with aspects of driving – encouraging the feeling of having spare attention for other things.

Other vehicle technology is for 'infotainment'. Modern cars essentially have computers in them, allowing drivers to carry out activities such as making a phone call, asking Alexa to add something to a shopping list, or checking social media. The problem is that hands-free technology doesn't offer any safety benefit over hand-held devices. Research has shown that a driver using a hands-free phone, for example, is four times more likely to be involved in a collision than an undistracted driver.¹ Distracted drivers are also far less likely to notice hazards – even if they look directly at them – meaning they fail to react to them. And when they do notice a hazard, they take significantly longer to react to it than an undistracted driver would.² This means that a driver can have both eyes on the road and both hands on the steering wheel, but if their mind is on a phone conversation their driving can be significantly impaired.³ While research in this area is emphatic, the findings are not accounted for in UK law. Hands-free distraction represents a significant danger, yet it is billed as the 'safe' alternative to hand-held use.

This focus on hand-held use is represented in the findings of Brake's survey: most respondents considered any task which took the driver's hands away from the wheel to be a significant distraction, yet few thought the same of hands-free phone use. This is interesting as two-thirds of people said that a challenging interaction with a passenger could be significantly distracting – indicating an awareness that distraction isn't just manual. A common challenge to research findings is that conversation with a passenger is equivalent to hands-free phone use. This isn't the case: a passenger is in a shared environment with the driver and can regulate their conversation. Someone on the phone doesn't have the benefit of shared environment and therefore consistently demands the driver's attention, making phone conversation more mentally demanding. While hand-held use is, of course, dangerous, and there is some acceptance that other types of conversation can be distracting, many still think that the real issue of phone use is the need to hold a device.

Research also shows that while many accept that *other* drivers get distracted, they often over-estimate their own capabilities. Most drivers think they are better than average. This pattern is shown in the survey findings, alongside strong support for the Government and car manufacturers to do more to reduce in-car distractions. This is interesting as changes to the law or removal of technology would impact all drivers, including those who consider themselves better than average!

It is encouraging to see that most drivers claim not to engage in secondary tasks when driving, and that around half of those surveyed thought that hands-free phone use is as dangerous as hand-held use. This demonstrates a shift in attitude, which is promising in terms of reducing the number of distracted drivers on the road. If more drivers can be convinced that they are as prone to distraction as everyone else, we could see a shift towards technology use by drivers being socially unacceptable.



Dr Gemma Briggs
Senior lecturer in psychology
The Open University



INTRODUCTION

Technology will undoubtedly play a crucial role in the journey to achieving a world where no one is killed or seriously injured on the roads. Technological advances brought us the first bicycle, the first car, the first seatbelt, the first airbag and, if predictions are correct, technology will eventually deliver the first completely driverless car.

While this last milestone remains a future possibility, for the time being we continue to live in a world where drivers must be focused and concentrate on controlling their vehicle in order to be safe and avoid crashes. The issue of driver distraction is therefore an important one, and so it is right that we not only praise the benefits of technology in vehicles, but that we investigate its potential negative impacts as well.

In this report, we explore the issue of in-vehicle distraction, looking into drivers' perceptions of a variety of potentially distracting actions and the prevalence with which they occur. Distraction from non-technological sources has been present in motor vehicles since they were first invented, and we ask drivers their views on some of these (e.g. smoking, eating, and arguing with a fellow passenger). However, as our world becomes increasingly connected, our primary focus is rightly on the potential distractions to the task of driving caused by existing and emerging technologies, helping ensure that the issue of safety is at the forefront of discussions on their development.

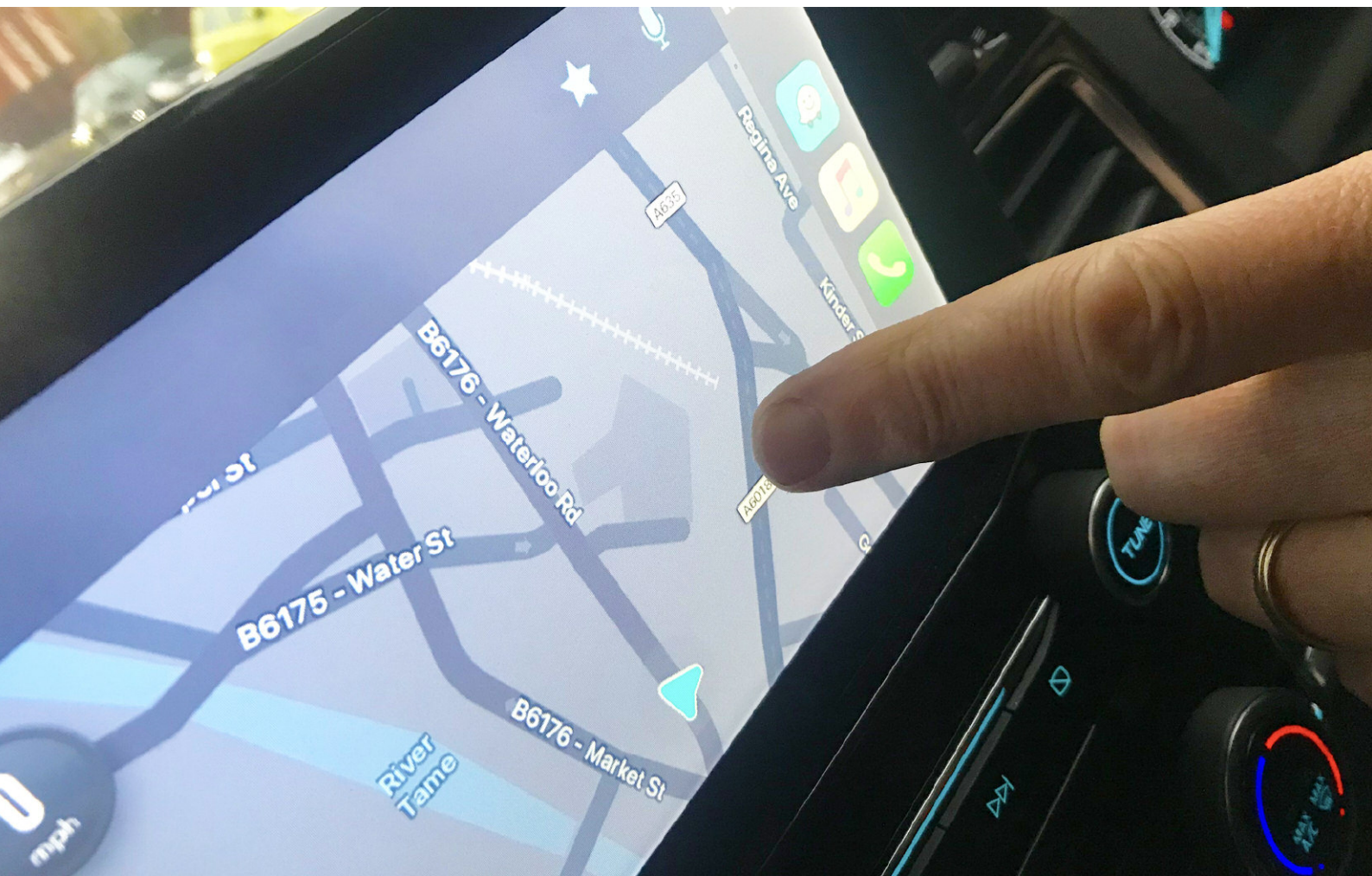
One technology which has undoubtedly changed the modern world, and which we focus specifically on in this report, is the mobile phone. People are now able to connect with each other, wherever and whenever, through their phones. Although the mobile phone has undoubtedly brought numerous benefits to individuals and society, research has repeatedly shown the dangers of its use behind the wheel, regardless of whether it's used hand-held or hands-free. With recent findings revealing how central mobile phones are to modern life – Ofcom found that smartphone owners cannot go 12 minutes without checking their phone* – this is clearly an issue that must be understood and properly addressed in the context of road safety.

I hope that the findings from this report will contribute to the ongoing debate around driver distraction and the development of technology in vehicles, highlighting areas where action and further investigation is needed to help keep our roads safe for all.



Josh Harris
Director of campaigns

*Ofcom (2018), Communications Market Report 2018





SECTION 1 – DISTRACTIONS TO THE TASK OF DRIVING

MULTI-TASKING

Driving always requires the full attention of the driver. Hazards can arise at any time, and vehicles can travel many metres in a short period – at 30mph, a vehicle will travel 13.5m every second. When a driver is distracted it impedes their ability to spot these hazards and react in time to avoid a crash. Yet many drivers are distracted and inattentive because they choose to share their attention with other tasks while driving, such as using a mobile phone, eating, smoking, personal grooming or changing in-car controls, in the belief that they can maintain control. Research, however, shows drivers are not able to gauge correctly the level of distraction they are suffering⁴ and 98% are not able to share their attention across tasks without a significant deterioration in driving performance.⁵

In this section of the report we sought drivers' views about actions that can distract them from driving.

In question 1, drivers were asked how distracting they think certain actions are to the task of driving.

The majority of drivers stated that each of the actions listed [a challenging interaction with a fellow passenger (e.g. screaming child, argument); having a conversation on a hands-free phone device; messaging/texting on a hand-held mobile device; personal grooming (e.g. combing hair, applying make-up); smoking or vaping; eating or drinking; adjusting a navigation system (satnav); and adjusting in-vehicle controls unrelated to the driving task (e.g. radio)] were to some extent distracting to the task of driving.

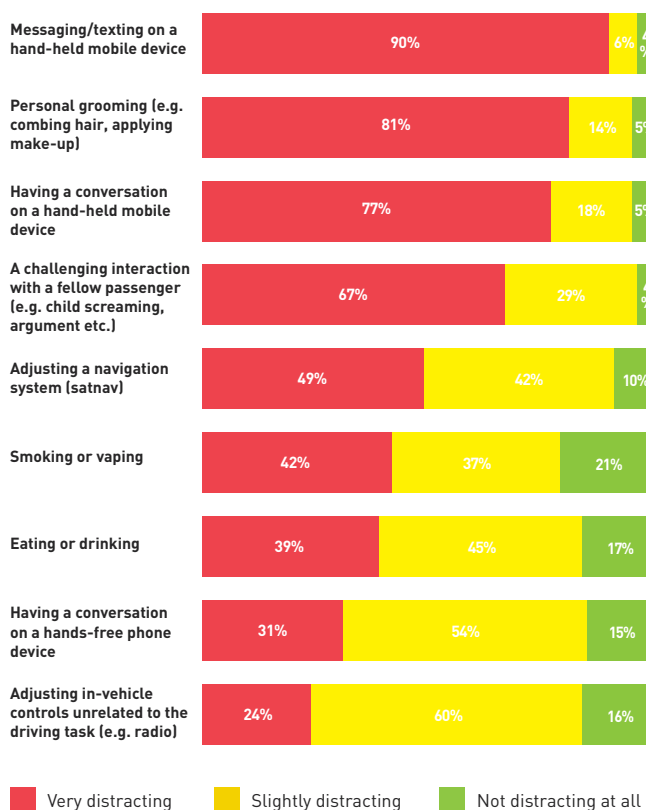
The action that drivers thought was the most distracting was messaging/texting on a hand-held mobile device, with nine in 10 drivers (90%) stating that they think this action is very distracting. This was followed closely by personal grooming (81%), having a conversation on a hand-held mobile device (77%), and having a challenging interaction with a fellow passenger (67%).

When looking at the intensity of a distraction, the action that most drivers thought was only slightly distracting was adjusting in-vehicle controls unrelated to the driving task, with six in 10 (60%) drivers stating this. The only other action thought to be only slightly distracting by more than half of drivers was having a conversation on a hands-free phone device (54%).

Drivers were more mixed in their views on the level of distraction caused by some of the other actions. When asked how distracting smoking or vaping is to the task of driving, a similar number of drivers thought that it was very distracting (42%) to those who thought it was only slightly distracting (37%). Similarly, for eating or drinking and adjusting a navigation system, drivers were, again, mixed in their views. Almost four in 10 (39%) people thought eating and drinking was very distracting and 45% felt it was slightly distracting, while 49% felt adjusting a navigation system was very distracting compared with 42% who found it slightly distracting.

Although the majority of drivers stated that all the actions are to some extent distracting, smoking or vaping had the highest proportion of drivers stating that it is not distracting at all (21%). This was followed by eating or drinking (17%), adjusting in-vehicle controls unrelated to the driving task (16%) and having a conversation on a hands-free phone device (15%).

Q1. How distracting do you think the following are to the task of driving?



In question 2, drivers were asked how frequently they have undertaken various actions while driving in the past 12 months.

Drivers' responses were mixed on how frequently they had undertaken the various actions within the past 12 months. However, all the actions were committed to a small extent. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was some correlation with actions that drivers undertook least frequently and those actions drivers had previously identified in question 1 as the most distracting to the task of driving.

The actions that drivers indicated they have undertaken least frequently while driving in the past 12 months were messaging or texting on a hand-held mobile device and personal grooming, with over eight in 10 (84%) drivers stating that they have not done either of these actions in the past 12 months. Notably, these were also the actions stated as the most distracting to the task of driving in question 1.

Just over three-quarters (78%) of drivers stated that they have not had a conversation on a hand-held mobile device while driving within the past 12 months. Of those who admitted to having a conversation on a hand-held mobile device within the past 12 months, 3% admitted doing so on every journey.

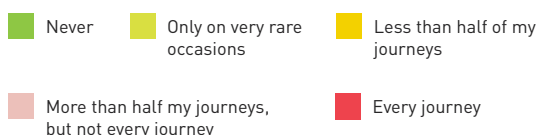
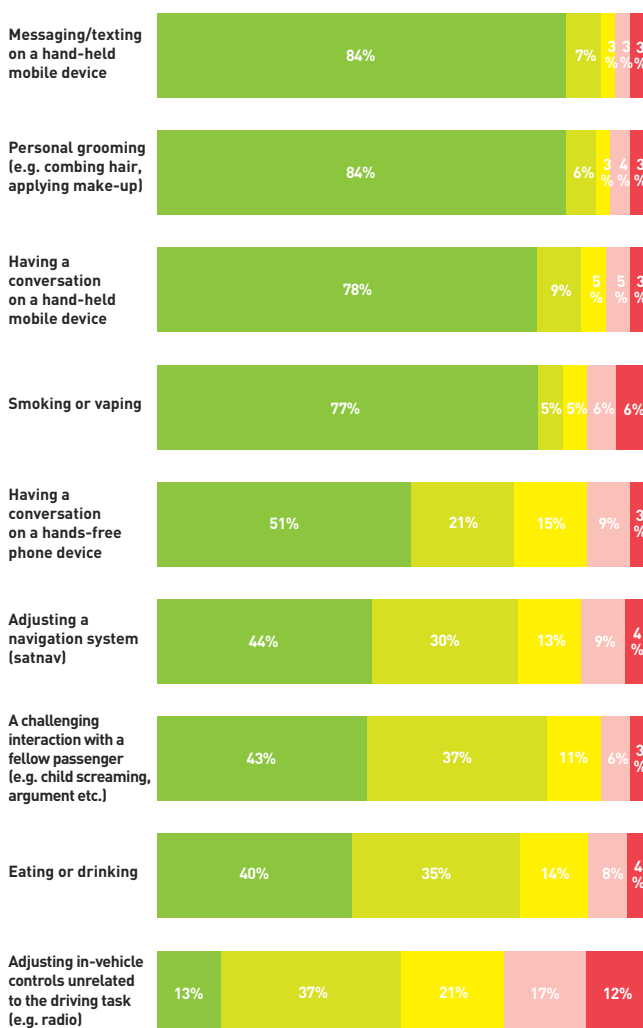
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Three-quarters (77%) of drivers stated that they haven't smoked or vaped while driving in the past 12 months, although 6% of drivers admitted to doing so on every journey – latest Government figures show that, in 2018, in the UK, 14.7% of people aged 18 years and above smoked cigarettes, and 6.3% of people in Great Britain reported that they currently used an e-cigarette.⁶

The most common action undertaken by drivers was adjusting in-vehicle controls unrelated to the driving task, with almost nine in 10 (87%) drivers saying they done so in the past 12 months. The frequency of undertaking this action was quite mixed, but there was a clear pattern of reduction in proportion as frequency increased.

Other actions that more drivers said they had undertaken than never undertaken in the past 12 months were: eating or drinking (60%); a challenging interaction with a fellow passenger (57%); and, adjusting a navigation system (56%).

Q2. How frequently have you undertaken the following while driving in the past 12 months?



SECTION 2 – TOO MUCH IN-VEHICLE DISTRACTION?

IN-VEHICLE DISTRACTIONS

Distractions to the task of driving come from many different sources and, as technology becomes an even more integral part of operating a vehicle, it is important that drivers recognise the many in-vehicle distractions that they face.

Mobile phone use

Use of a hand-held mobile phone device as an interactive communication device while driving is illegal in the UK. Using a phone in any way diverts a driver's attention from the road, both during the call and after it has finished. Aside from mental distraction, anything that takes a driver's eyes or hands off the road for any length of time (for example to check messages or scroll through music options) can potentially be lethal.

Eating and drinking

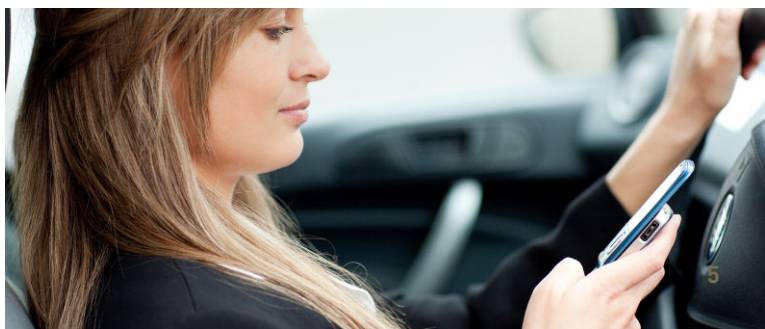
Drivers who eat and drink at the wheel are twice as likely to crash.⁷ Eating and drinking while driving diverts attention away from the driving task, increasing reaction times by up to 44%, meaning drivers will respond to hazards much more slowly. It also causes physical distraction, as at least one hand is off the wheel holding food or drink.⁸

Smoking and vaping

Several studies have found smoking while driving increases crash risk.⁹ Accessing and lighting a cigarette within the car causes physical and mental distraction. The smoke from a lit cigarette, or the vapour from a vape, from the driver or passenger, could impair the driver's vision. Additionally, a lit cigarette falling into the driver's lap or onto a seat could cause distraction.

In-vehicle technology

Many vehicles now come equipped with entertainment and communications technology that enables drivers to carry out tasks, or access information or entertainment, completely unrelated to driving, such as checking social media. Research showing the dangers of accessing information or engaging in communications via mobile phones suggests that using such technology at the wheel would pose a significant danger.¹⁰



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In this section drivers were asked their views on the levels of in-vehicle distraction and options to tackle this.

For question 3, drivers were asked to rate their agreement with a variety of statements on in-vehicle distraction.

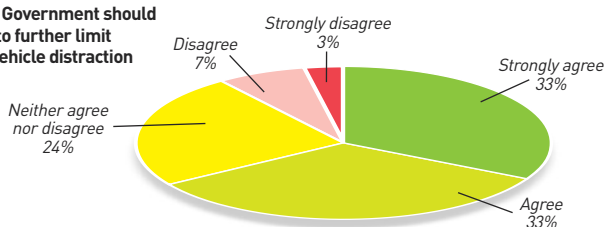
Question 3a.

Two-thirds (66%) of drivers agree or strongly agree that the Government should act to further limit in-vehicle distraction, with only one in 10 (10%) drivers disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this statement.

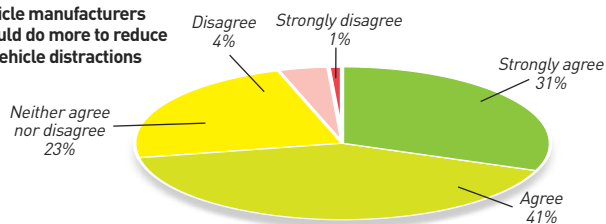
A similar proportion of drivers agree or strongly agree that vehicle manufacturers should do more to reduce in-vehicle distractions, with seven in 10 (72%) drivers agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 5% of drivers disagreed or strongly disagreed that vehicle manufacturers should do more.

Q3a. Rate your agreement with each of the following statements

The Government should act to further limit in-vehicle distraction



Vehicle manufacturers should do more to reduce in-vehicle distractions



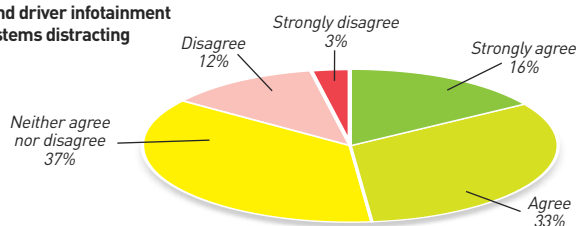
Question 3b.

When asked if they find driver infotainment systems distracting, drivers were mixed in their views. Slightly fewer than half (49%) of drivers agreed or strongly agreed that they did find them distracting, while 15% of drivers disagreed or strongly disagreed.

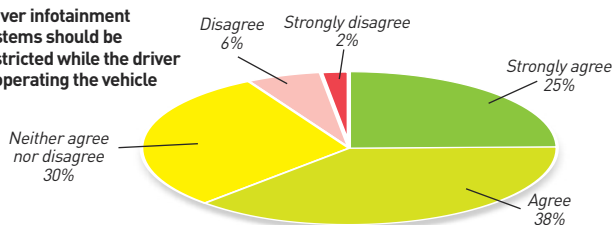
The majority (63%) of drivers agree or strongly agree that driver infotainment systems should be restricted while the driver is operating the vehicle. Only slightly fewer than one in 10 (8%) drivers disagree or strongly disagree.

Q3b. Rate your agreement with each of the following statements

I find driver infotainment systems distracting



Driver infotainment systems should be restricted while the driver is operating the vehicle



Question 3c.

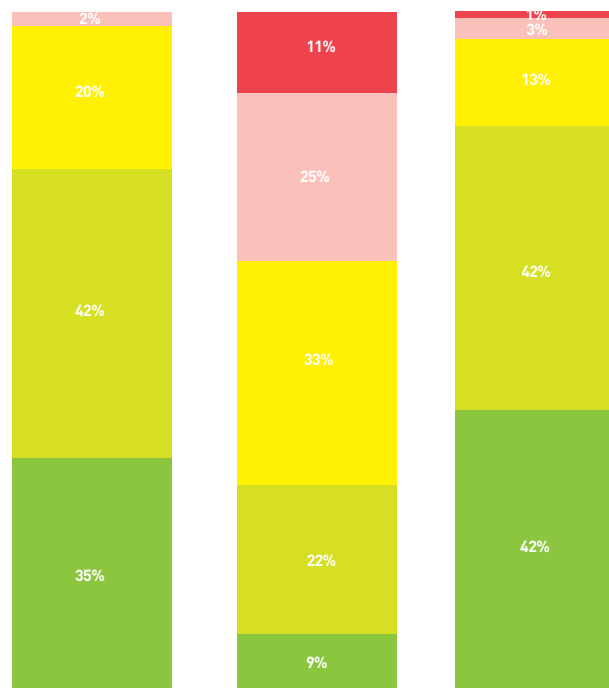
When asked if there are more in-vehicle distractions now than there were five years ago, more than eight in 10 (84%) drivers agreed or strongly agreed that there are. Only 4% of drivers disagreed or strongly disagreed.

These views were also reflected when drivers were asked if, generally, other drivers appear more distracted than they did five years ago, with three-quarters (77%) of drivers agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement and only 2% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Notably, however, when asked if generally, they find themselves more distracted from the task of driving than they did five years ago, drivers' views were more mixed than for the previous statements. Three in 10 (31%) drivers agreed or strongly agreed that they found themselves more distracted, a third (33%) neither agreed nor disagreed, and just over a third (36%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Collectively, these findings perhaps indicate that drivers underestimate their own levels of distraction – the majority acknowledge that there are more in-vehicle distractions now than five years ago and think other drivers appear more distracted than they did then, but only a third believe they themselves are more distracted.

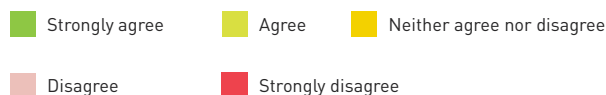
Q3c. Rate your agreement with each of the following statements



Generally, other drivers appear more distracted than they did five years ago

Generally, I find myself more distracted from the task of driving than I did five years ago

There are more in-vehicle distractions now than there were five years ago



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DRIVER ADVICE AND THE HIGHWAY CODE

Driving is a complex task which requires your full attention to do safely. If you use a mobile phone, eat, adjust the stereo, do your make up, or do anything else that takes your eyes and mind off the road or your hands off the wheel, you're significantly increasing your chances of being involved in a crash.

The Highway Code states that you must exercise proper control of your vehicle at all times. It advises drivers and riders to avoid distractions such as: loud music (as this may mask other sounds); trying to read maps; inserting a cassette or CD or tuning a radio; arguing with your passengers or other road users; eating and drinking; and, smoking.

The Highway Code also states that you must not use a hand-held mobile phone, or similar device, when driving or when supervising a learner driver, except to call 999 or 112 in a genuine emergency when it is unsafe or impractical to stop. The Highway Code further states that using hands-free equipment is likely to distract your attention from the road and that it is far safer not to use any telephone while you are driving or riding, recommending that drivers find a safe place to stop first or use the voicemail facility and listen to messages later.

Brake's top tip: The only way to avoid dangerous distraction from your phone is to switch it to silent and put it out of sight and reach when you're driving.

The Highway Code highlights the danger of driver distraction being caused by in-vehicle systems such as navigation systems (satnavs), congestion warning systems, computers, multi-media, etc. It states: you must exercise proper control of your vehicle at all times; do not rely on driver assistance systems such as cruise control or lane departure warnings, they are available to assist but you should not reduce your concentration levels; do not be distracted by maps or screen-based information (such as navigation or vehicle management systems) while driving or riding, if necessary find a safe place to stop.¹¹

IMOGEN'S STORY

When Imogen Cauthery was nine years old, she was knocked down by a driver while crossing the road with her sister and best friend.

The driver was using his phone at the time and did not even stop to check she was alive. Imogen remained in a coma for 10 days and suffered long-term debilitating injuries, including brain damage. Now aged 32, she still experiences epileptic seizures and her memory has been affected by the injuries she sustained.



Imogen said: "I've been living with the consequences of a driver being distracted by their phone for years and I think it's really important people understand that it only takes a moment's inattention to change someone's life. If drivers simply commit to staying focused behind the wheel and ignoring all those in-vehicle distractions, then they can make a real difference to the safety of our roads."

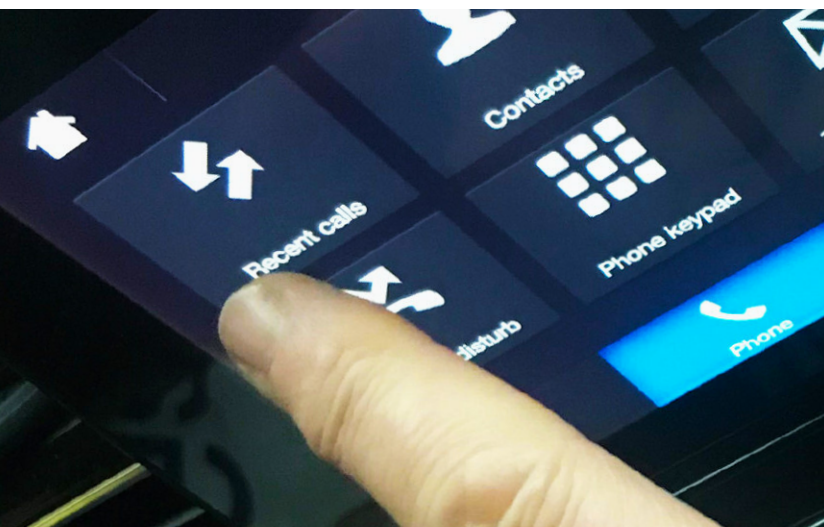
SECTION 3 – HANDS-FREE MOBILE PHONES

THE DANGERS OF HANDS-FREE PHONE DEVICES

Talking on a hands-free phone can be just as dangerous as talking on a hand-held phone. A driver using a phone—hand-held or hands-free—is four times more likely to be involved in a collision. The risks of using a mobile phone while driving results from the cognitive distraction involved in using the device – the call itself – and not from having to use a hand to hold the device.¹²

Research has also found that having a hands-free call produces the same behavioural effects as being at the legal limit for alcohol blood level. People often find this difficult to accept, because although the amount of alcohol in a driver's system can be accurately measured, it is more difficult to reliably gauge driver distraction from moment to moment. A driver who is under the influence of alcohol will remain persistently impaired for the duration of their journey, but a distracted driver may only be impaired while they use their phone, and for a short period afterwards.¹³

A recent report by the Transport Select Committee concluded that hands-free phone devices are just as dangerous as hand-held phone devices and recommended that all phone use behind the wheel be banned.¹⁴

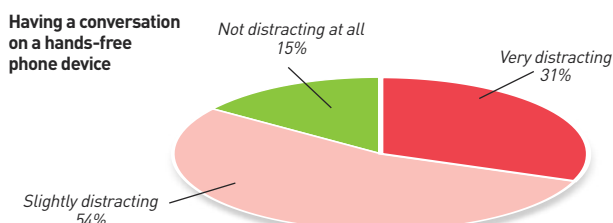


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In this section we took a more in-depth look into drivers' views about the use of hands-free mobile phone devices.

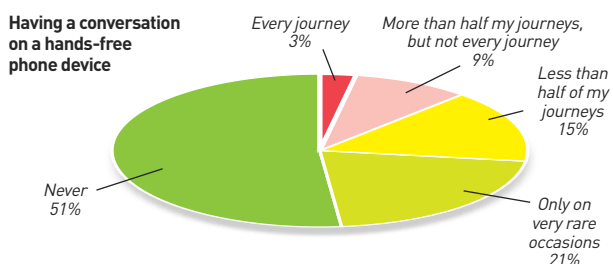
In response to question 1, more than eight in 10 (85%) drivers stated that having a conversation on a hands-free phone device at least partially distracts them from driving.

How distracting do you think the following is to the task of driving?



In response to question 2, nearly half (49%) of drivers stated they have had a conversation on a hands-free phone device in the past 12 months but the majority (72%) stated that they did this only on very rare occasions or never.

How frequently have you undertaken the following while driving in the past 12 months?



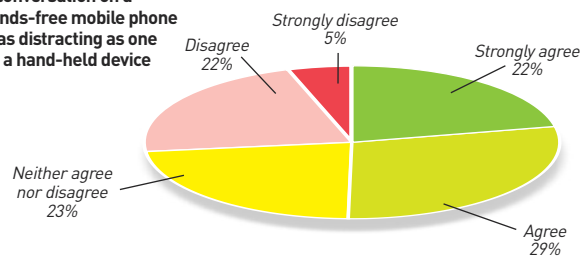
For question 4, drivers were asked to rate their agreement with statements on hands-free mobile phones and mobile phone manufacturers' actions to curb phone use, by drivers, in vehicles.

The majority (51%) of drivers agree or strongly agree that a conversation on a hands-free mobile phone is as distracting as one on a hand-held device. A further quarter (27%) of drivers disagree or strongly disagree and just under a quarter (23%) of drivers neither agree nor disagree.

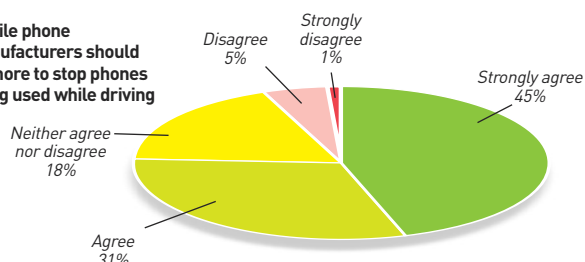
When asked if mobile phone manufacturers should do more to stop phones being used while driving, three-quarters (76%) of drivers agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, and only 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Slightly fewer than two in 10 drivers (18%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Q4. Rate your agreement with each of the following statements

A conversation on a hands-free mobile phone is as distracting as one on a hand-held device



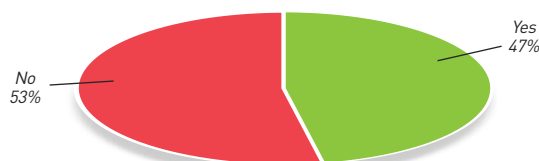
Mobile phone manufacturers should do more to stop phones being used while driving



In question 5, drivers were asked if hands-free phone devices should be banned when driving.

Drivers were split in their views on whether hands-free devices should be banned when driving, with 47% saying yes and 53% saying no. This is noteworthy given that the majority of drivers also acknowledged that having a conversation on a hands-free phone device is distracting and agree that it is as distracting as a conversation on a hand-held phone device, which is currently banned.

Q5. Do you think hands-free phone devices should be banned when driving?



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THE LAW – CARELESS DRIVING (DRIVING WITHOUT DUE CARE AND ATTENTION)

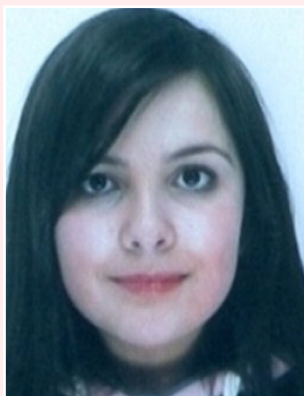
The offence of driving without due care and attention, also referred to as careless driving, covers many different behaviours. Defined as “allowing the standard of driving to fall below that of a competent and careful driver”, it carries a CD10 endorsement code, which can be issued against your driving licence.

The sentencing council sets out the main factors that demonstrate culpability.¹⁵ This includes “carrying out other tasks while driving”. However, any driving that demonstrates lack of alertness to the dangers of the road, or a disregard for other road users (whether deliberate or not), may be considered to be an offence. Although there is no definitive list, the following behaviours could be considered an offence: adjusting the radio or an ‘infotainment’ system; adjusting a navigation system (satnav); reading something (e.g. a map); eating or drinking at the wheel; and being distracted by passengers in the car.

If you are caught driving without due care and attention this will normally result in a Fixed Penalty Notice, which is a £100 fine and three points on your licence. If the offence is more serious (i.e. if you have endangered other drivers or pedestrians, or caused a crash), you will automatically be summoned to court. The maximum penalty here is nine points on your licence and a £5,000 fine – or even a driving ban. The maximum penalty for causing death by careless or inconsiderate driving is a prison sentence of five years and/or an unlimited fine, plus disqualification from driving for a minimum of one year.¹⁶

NAZAN'S STORY

Hope Fennell was crossing the road near her school in Kings Heath, West Midlands, in November 2011 when she was hit by a lorry, trapping her underneath. The driver had been distracted by his phone and had failed to see 13-year-old Hope in the vehicle's blind spot. By the time equipment had been found to lift the lorry, it was too late and Nazan's teenage daughter had died.



Nazan said: “When driving, any distraction is dangerous. We must work to minimise driver distraction and make sure our streets are safe for our children.”



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