New Distracted Driving Measure Shows Alcohol Is Still The Bigger Threat

The safety threat posed by drivers who text and talk behind the wheel generates a lot of heat, but drinking and driving remains the bigger problem, according to the latest highway fatality statistics from the U.S. government.

Distracted driving accounted for about nine percent of all highway fatalities in the U.S. in 2010, while 31% of deaths were linked to alcohol, according to a new measure of distracted driving deaths released as part of a U.S. Transportation Department report Thursday. http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811552.pdf

The report, which updates fatality figures released earlier in the year, confirmed earlier estimates that overall highway deaths fell in 2010 to the lowest level in six decades, even as Americans drove more. The death toll from all vehicle crashes fell 2.9% to 32,885 people, or a fatality rate of 1.1 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has pursued a vigorous campaign to discourage drivers from texting, talking on phones or fiddling with entertainment devices, sometimes to the consternation of car makers and safety advocates who say drinking and other factors deserve more attention.

The DOT's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Thursday released a new measure of what it calls "distraction affected crashes" that the agency said is aimed at refining the tally of accidents caused by a driver distracted while dialing a cell phone, texting or dealing with some other event. The agency said about 3,092 crashes in 2010 were linked to distraction using the new method, and added that the change in methodology means that figure can't be compared to the 5,474 "distraction related" deaths counted in 2009.

In a separate report released Friday, http://www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/Pubs/811517.pdf the DOT said it found that its surveys found about 5% of motorists drove with cellphones held to their ears – which is illegal in some states - while 0.9% were observed "manipulating" a handheld device, a proxy for texting.

By any measure, alcohol remains a larger highway safety problem, though alcohol related fatalities fell 4.9% in 2010 compared to 2009. The DOT figures counted 10,228 alcohol related highway deaths.

Overall, highway deaths have been declining steadily since the early 1980s, coinciding with increasingly sophisticated safety technology in cars and light trucks, such as airbags and more recently electronic systems designed to prevent SUVs from rolling over. Changes in driver behavior have helped too, as more motorists use seat belts, and fewer drive after drinking heavily. The latest count of alcohol related traffic deaths is down 41% from 2000, when 17,380 people died in crashes where alcohol was a contributing factor.

Another encouraging trend found in the latest figures: Fatalities among young drivers 16 to 20 years old have declined by 39% between 2006 and 2010, faster than the overall rate of decline in highway deaths.

http://blogs.wsj.com/drivers-seat/2011/12/09/new-distracted-driving-measure-shows-alcohol-is-still-the-bigger-threat/?mod=google_news_blog

To read more about Drinking and Drugged Driving, click here. To read NCADD's Fact Sheet on Drinking and Drugged Driving Fact Sheet, click here.