TRAFFIC SAFETY RESEARCH AND EVALUATION GROUP
University of Georgia

Distracted Walking: Are you a "Petextrian?"

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GOHS

Distracted Pedestrians: Trends and New Findings; Tuesday, April 29, 9:00 – 10:30 am

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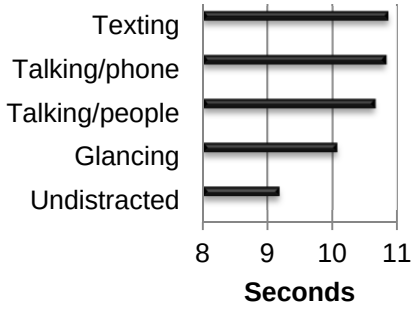
Background

In recent years, much of the focus in traffic safety has been on distracted driving, but distracted walking can be just as dangerous. **Inattentiveness may be responsible for 10-15% of all pedestrian deaths**. An online survey from 2012 found that 65% of people have texted while walking, and 63% of people believe that it is safe. Texting while walking is more prevalent in younger age groups. Little research has been done in this area, but some studies have shown that texting pedestrians take a longer time to cross the street and are more likely to display unsafe crossing behaviors. Cognitive distraction can also result in failure to process information needed to cross safely.

Methods

Pedestrians were observed while crossing the street at 20 high-risk intersections during one of three randomly assigned time periods. Intersections were selected using a crash risk ratio with data from the Georgia Department of Transportation (GDOT) and Governor's Office of Highway Safety (GOHS). Types of distractions observed included talking or texting on a mobile phone, listening to music through headphones, and talking with other pedestrians. Information was also recorded regarding street crossing behaviors such as use of crosswalk, obedience to traffic signals, crossing activity (walking, jogging, or darting) and looking left and right before crossing. Time taken to cross was also recorded. Data was entered and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 21. This study replicated an observational study from Seattle, WA (Thompson, Rivara, Ayyagari & Ebel, 2012).

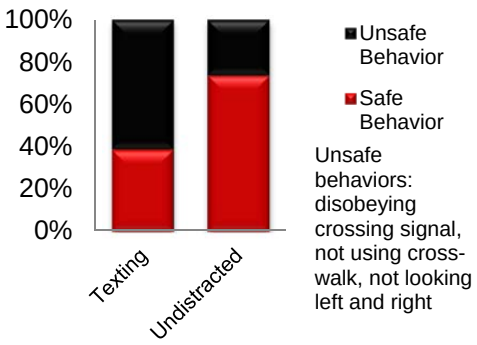
Average Crossing Time



Results

Observational data was recorded for 997 pedestrians. The majority of the sample (85.3%) was between the ages of 18 and 24. Approximately 56.7% of the sample was female, and 79.4% was Caucasian. **Nearly half of all pedestrians (48.6%) performed some type of distracting activity while crossing**. Of those, 32.5% were talking to other people, 26.1% were listening to headphones, 15.4% were texting, and 13.6% were talking on the phone. Approximately 5.8% of the total sample was engaged in multiple distractions, including listening to music while texting and listening to music while glancing down at the phone. Those who were distracted took an average of 1 second longer to cross than those who were not distracted. Texting pedestrians were 2.34 times more likely to display an unsafe crossing behavior than undistracted pedestrians. People who were distracted were less likely to look left and right before crossing. An unexpected finding was that those who were not distracted were less likely to obey the traffic signal and less likely to use crosswalks. This may be because they perceived their risk to be lower due to the fact that they were paying attention and therefore were more likely to engage in more dangerous crossing behaviors.

Texting and Unsafe Behaviors



Unsafe behaviors: disobeying crossing signal, not using cross-walk, not looking left and right

Conclusion

Distracted walking while crossing the street is very common among people ages 18-24. Distraction increases crossing time and unsafe crossing behaviors, putting pedestrians at greater risk. Texting was associated with the greatest risk. The shift in social norms from face-to-face interaction to electronic communication has resulted in decreased vigilance of both drivers and pedestrians. The findings of this research study suggest the need for intervention efforts to decrease the use of mobile devices while walking in order to increase the attentiveness of all people on the roadways.

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