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PRESS RELEASE

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New Studies Show Distracted Driving on Increase

Cell phone use up, especially among youth. College students think they can handle it.

Sacramento, CA – The California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) today released the results of studies on distracted driving. The studies come on the heels of the second annual Distracted Driving Awareness Month, which saw hundreds of law enforcement agencies stepping up enforcement of the state's cell phone and texting while driving laws.

For the second year in row, OTS commissioned an observational survey of cell phone use by drivers within the state, looking for hand-held and hands-free talking as well as texting and other use of mobile devices while driving. The overall rate was 10.8 percent of drivers on the road using cell phones at any given daylight time, up from 7.3 percent in 2011. Although observed cell phone use increases were seen across all age groups, 16 to 25 year olds showed a dramatic rise, doubling from 9 percent to 18 percent.

"These results are disturbing, but not entirely unforeseen," said OTS Director Christopher J. Murphy. "Now that smartphones are becoming the majority, people are using them more often and in many more ways. This might be helpful in a lot of places, but definitely not behind the wheel."

Researchers fanned out to more than 130 intersections in 17 counties to observe whether drivers had a phone to their ear, were wearing a Bluetooth or headset device, were manipulating a hand-held device, or were talking while holding a phone in their hand but not to their ear.

A similar nationwide survey conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in 2010 showed the combined usage rate of 9.6 percent. OTS considers the latest results to be low-end indications of drivers engaged in these dangerous behaviors, since it's not always possible to tell in a short, limited view observation whether someone is using a phone, especially for texting or using apps. Possible explanations for the large increase in device use could be that more young people who tend to text more are now drivers, in addition to smartphones with handy "apps" becoming much more widespread.

In another study, researchers at the University of California, San Diego studied the prevalence and type of distracted driving behaviors in younger drivers. Researchers surveyed nearly 5,000 college and university students between the ages of 18 – 29, with an average age of 21 years in San Diego County. The results of the online survey were wide-ranging. Some of the highlights include:

- 78 percent reported using a cell phone while driving (talking or texting).
- 52 percent reported ever using hands-free cell phones, and only 25 percent used hands-free with high frequency.
- 50 percent said they send texts while driving on freeways, 60 percent in stop-and-go traffic or on city streets, and 87 percent at traffic lights. Texting is illegal whether moving or at a stop.
- 17.5 percent said they had been in a collision due to distracted driving. Of those crashes, 24 percent were due to reaching away, 24 percent talking to passenger, 22 percent texting, 16 percent working the radio or other audio player, and 14 percent talking on a cell phone.
- 66 percent considered themselves in the top 20 percent of driving skill, compared with other college students.
- 46 percent said they were capable or very capable of talking on a cell phone and driving, but they felt only 8.5 percent of others were.

“We know from other studies that a growing percentage of the population is getting the message that using cell phones is dangerous,” said Murphy. “What this new information tells us is that too many are still convinced that a crash will never happen to them. We have to turn that thinking around or we will see tragic increases in fatal and injury crashes.”

The California Strategic Highway Safety Plan, a collaboration of Federal, State, County and local governments, as well as numerous advocate groups, businesses, and community organizations, last year created a new “Challenge Area” specifically for distracted driving, with an emphasis on cell phone usage.

Full results of the OTS study can be found at www.ots.ca.gov. The U.C. San Diego study can be found at <http://treds.ucsd.edu/>.

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