

Safety Council warns against distracted drivers

Can you see them?

They're everywhere around the country. The roads see countless numbers of these people every day. All around Canada, they're a frequent topic of discussion for motorists and non-motorists alike. And they make commutes for responsible drivers more challenging and dangerous than they need to be.

Distracted drivers put everyone at risk. During National Road Safety Week (May 16 to 22), the Canada Safety Council and State Farm Canada want people to be on the lookout for distracted drivers.

"It's hard to overstate the importance of distracted driving awareness," Canada Safety Council President Jack Smith said. "This is a serious problem on Canadian roads. We live in a society where people believe it's important to be in contact at all times, whether it's with work, family or friends. But the world won't stop spinning if you let a phone call go to voicemail or take a little longer than usual to answer a text message or an email. Keep your attention squarely where it belongs: on the road."

A distracted driver can be described as any driver whose sole focus is not on the road. This can include, but is not limited to, cell phone use (whether handheld or hands-free,) eating or grooming behind the wheel, or reading and using a Global Positioning System (GPS). All these behaviours can lead to slower reaction time, impaired judgment and can ultimately be responsible for collisions, injuries and even fatalities.

"Anything that distracts or impairs your ability to drive puts drivers, passengers, pedestrians and other road users at risk," said Zac Stevenson, public relations advisor with State Farm Canada. "Drivers should always strive to be alert and focused while on the road. Distracted driving is a very serious threat to the safety of all road users. As a leading insurer, we're proud to support partners like Canada Safety Council in bringing further awareness to this issue."

The statistics don't lie, and in the case of distracted driving, they paint a pretty dark picture. According to the Canadian Automobile Association, distraction is a factor in approximately four million motor vehicle crashes across North America every year. Studies have repeatedly shown a majority of road users admit to driving distracted, but a majority also do not believe themselves to be part of the problem.

Texting drivers are also 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash or near crash than a non-distracted driver. And, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, distraction affects 10 per cent of fatal crashes, 18 per cent of injury crashes, and 16 per cent of all police-reported motor vehicle traffic crashes.

In Canada, though data is slightly more limited, estimates from the Traffic Injury Research Foundation suggest approximately 25 per cent of collisions in 2013 as being related to driver distraction. The groups most likely to be distracted in fatal crashes are 20 to 34 year olds, as well as drivers aged 65 and older.

Using a mobile device behind the wheel is, of course, illegal across most of Canada. Aside from Nunavut, where there are no distracted driving laws on the books, every other province and territory has legislation that includes loss of demerit points and a fine for distracted drivers who are apprehended.

But this represents one of the biggest challenges in enforcing these laws: with the problem of distracted driving being so rampant and omnipresent, there simply aren't enough resources available or hours in the day to catch every distracted driver.

That's where the public comes in. For this year's campaign, the goal is to raise awareness about exactly how widespread this issue is. Whether someone has a story to share, a comment about the issue or an experience related to distracted driving, they want to hear them.

When it's safe to do so and you're not behind the wheel yourself, send a message on Twitter @CanadaSafetyCSC with the hashtag #CanYouSeeThem.

Continue being a responsible road user and keeping the focus on the car and its surroundings at all times. The more aware you are of what's going on around you, the better you'll be able to predict the behaviours of those around you and the more prepared you'll be to take action to prevent a crash.