TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMISSION

DISTRACTED DRIVING IN WASHINGTON STATE DURING COVID-19

2020 Observation Survey, Enforcement, and Crashes

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Executive Summary of Report Findings

In January 2020 the first U.S. case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Washington. Initial statewide lockdowns took effect in March and continue today. This report describes the impacts of the COVID-19 response on distracted driving during the year 2020. This report also provides a review of changes made to the Police Traffic Collision Report (PTCR) implemented in January 1, 2020, and how these changes impacted the reporting of distracted driving in injury crashes.

Distracted Driving Behavior

- The statewide distracted driver rate increased from 6.8 to 9.4 percent of all drivers. Although this change to the statewide rate was not statistically significant, the results certainly indicate an overall increase in this high-risk behavior.

- Distracted driving behavior on city streets soared from less than one of every ten drivers to nearly one of every five drivers, an increase that is statistically significant. A similar double-the-rate increase occurred on county roads.

- On city streets, cell phone use (holding the phone and phone to ear) while driving increased from 6.3 percent to 11.7 percent of drivers, an 86 percent increase. On county roads, cell phone use increased from 4.8 percent to six percent of all drivers, a 25 percent increase. Cell phone use on state routes remained the same at 4.2 percent.

- The frequency at which drivers were observed engaging in non-cell phone related distraction more than doubled on city streets and more than tripled on county roads. There was a slight decrease in the frequency of non-cell phone related distraction on state routes.

- Changes in distracted driving behavior may be explained by substantial decreases in distracted driving enforcement, vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and an increase in extreme vehicle speeds.

Distracted Driving Enforcement

- Washington law enforcement issued more distracted driving citations during the April 2019 enforcement campaign than any other month since Washington's first "texting" law became a primary offense in 2010. By contrast, the least amount of tickets issued in one month (a 95 percent reduction from the previous year) occurred in April 2020, the month following the initial Stay Home, Stay Healthy order.

- Washington conducted a distracted driving high visibility enforcement campaign in September 2020 – partially in response to rising crash trends. One-third of all distracted driving citations issued in 2020 occurred in August, September, and October.

- Using an electronic device while driving is a primary traffic offense, and despite over 20,000 citations issued in 2020, there was still a 44 percent decrease compared to citations issued in 2019. There was a change of less than three percent in the number of second and subsequent offenses issued in 2020. Even during COVID-19 restrictions, law enforcement was able to apprehend and penalize frequent violators of distracted driving laws.

Distracted Driving Involved Crashes

- In 2020 distracted driver-involved fatalities decreased 24 percent. However, the largest distracted driver-involved fatality reductions in 2020 were in the months January – March, prior to significant COVID-19 response and traffic reductions.

- Distracted driver-involved fatalities occurring January – March were less than half of what occurred in 2019, yet April and August – October had increases in distracted driver-involved fatalities. These monthly patterns reveal that the reduction of fatalities in 2020 was likely due to the implementation of PTCR coding changes.

- Serious injuries involving a distracted driver decreased 29 percent. An analysis of serious injury data revealed a significant relationship when comparing the reporting of speeding versus distraction in crashes; when speeding involvement in crashes is high, distraction involvement is low.

- Since driver speeding and distraction result in similar crash characteristics (loss of control, leaving the roadway, overcorrecting, etc.), speeding may "overshadow" distracted driving in crash investigation. Speeding as a factor in fatal crashes did not change much, but increased 18 percent among serious injuries.

- Among both fatalities and serious injuries involving a distracted driver, August emerged as a historically deadly and dangerous month, representing a shift from previous years marking July as the deadliest month. VMT data show people were increasing travel exposure during the month of August 2020 possibly due to "COVID fatigue". More data will be needed to determine if permanent adjustments to summertime programming and enforcement is needed, or if this monthly shift was unique to 2020.

Background/Introduction

Driver distraction has always been a focus of prevention among the traffic safety community. Driver distraction includes all activities that divert attention and full engagement from the task of driving, including general inattention (lost in thought), smoking, eating, grooming, reading, interactions with passengers or vehicle controls, and electronic device use. Numerous studies (simulator, closed-track, in-vehicle camera, and others) have shown significant increases in serious driving errors resulting from cell phone use while driving (WTSC, 2020). The Injury and Violence Prevention workgroup for *Healthy People 2030* has identified just three emerging unintentional injury issues in need of further research, analysis, and monitoring, one of which is motor vehicle crashes due to distracted driving (ODPHP, 2021). This workgroup has identified the need to better understand the trends, causes, and prevention strategies related to distracted driving. A recent survey showed that most U.S. drivers (83 percent) reported texting and driving is a "serious issue", even higher than the percent of drivers reporting the same for alcohol-impaired driving (81 percent) (TIRF USA, 2020).

In 2017 Washington passed stricter distracted driving laws (RCW 46.61.672 and RCW 46.61.673). The new laws ban all hand-held cell phone use while driving–even when stopped in traffic or at a traffic light. In addition, the cost charged per ticket increases for subsequent violations. A new secondary offense defined as "dangerously distracted" was also created. A secondary dangerously distracted citation may be issued to a person who engages in any activity not related to the operation of the vehicle in a manner that interferes with the safe operation of the vehicle. Finally, the new laws make these infractions available to automobile insurance companies.

The new laws became effective on July 23, 2017. The majority of law enforcement delayed enforcement of these new laws in lieu of education opportunities with drivers. Full enforcement began in January 2018. According to a previous analysis (WTSC, 2020), officers issued over 33,000 distracted driving citations in 2018 and over 37,000 in 2019. Most law enforcement agencies participate in the April Distracted Driving Emphasis Patrols, making that month the highest for citations issued, both before and after the law change. However, April 2020, had the lowest month of distracted driving citations issued ever, a 95 percent reduction from just the previous year.

In January 2020 the first U.S. case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Washington. Initial statewide lockdowns took effect in March, and by April most law enforcement were limiting exposure to the public. Among other guidance to law enforcement for preventing COVID-19 spread, limiting response to low-risk incidents (such as traffic stops and noise complaints) were recommended (Jennings and Perez, 2020). Traffic enforcement shifted to almost solely extreme incidents – mainly drivers traveling at very high speeds. And with a significant reduction in traffic volumes, drivers traveling at very high speeds increased. Across the U.S., state highway safety offices shared early reports of dramatic spikes in the number of citations being issued to drivers traveling more than 100 miles per hour. Enforcement of distracted driving eventually increased as 2020 progressed, however never reached 2019 levels in any months.

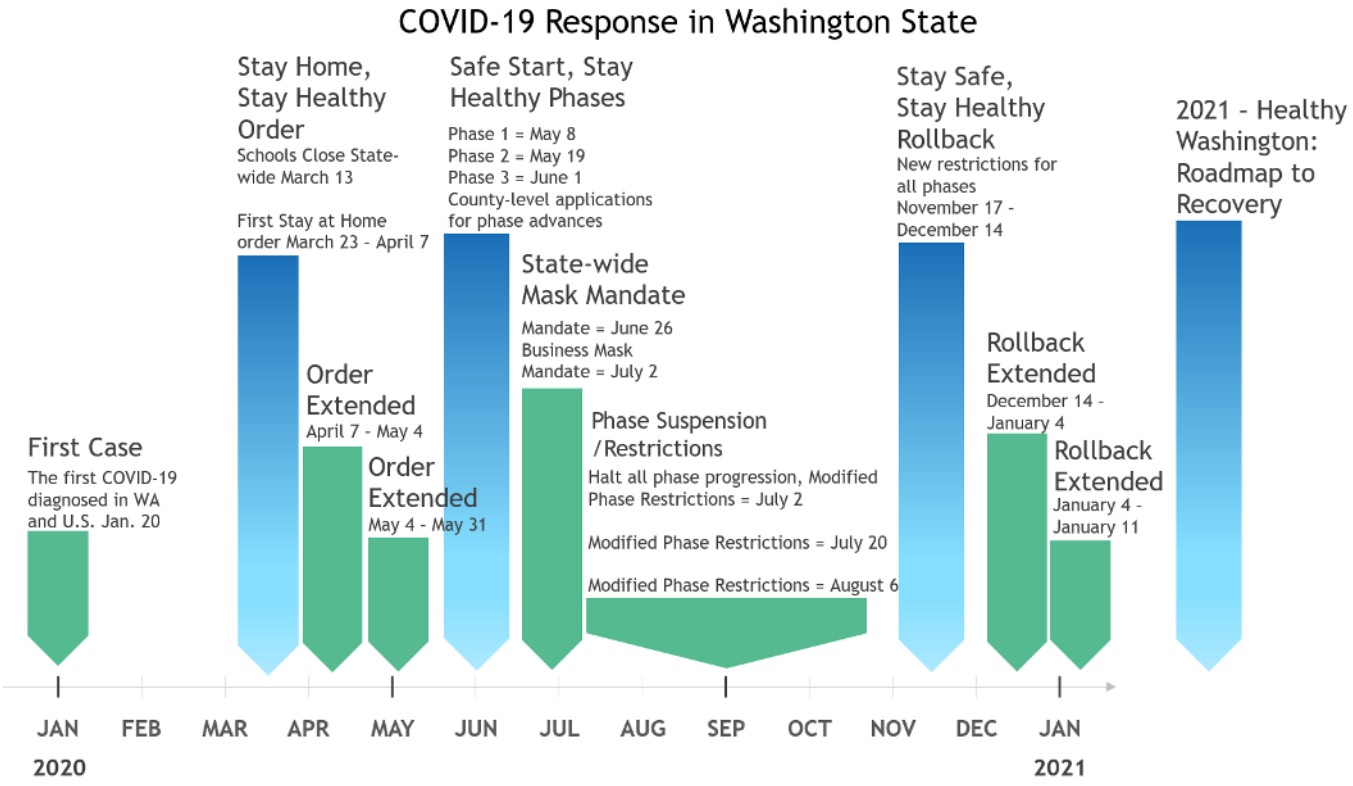
In 2018 there was an unprecedented single-year reduction in fatalities involving a distracted driver (25 percent), appearing to be an immediate impact of the enhanced distracted driving law. Fatalities did not continue to decline in 2019, however the immediate reduction realized in 2018 was sustained. In 2020

distracted driver-involved fatalities dropped again by an unprecedented single-year reduction of 24 percent. Unfortunately, with historically low distracted driving enforcement levels and an increase in distracted driving (according to the observation survey), it is likely that a change to Washington's PTCR, (along with increases in speeding involvement in crashes) influenced a measurable portion of this reduction, not necessarily a change in driver behavior. This report includes an explanation of the PTCR update and how it may have affected distracted driving crash reporting and trends.

The statewide estimate of Washington's driver distraction rate in 2019 was 6.8 percent. The driver distraction rate was highest on city streets (8.1 percent) followed by county roads (6.5 percent) and state routes (6.6 percent). Most driver distractions are from cell phone use, and similar rates of cell phone use while driving have been reported in other states such as California (Bommer, 2018), and nationally (NHTSA, 2019). In 2020 the Washington distracted driving rate increased, and the rate more than doubled on city streets to one of every six drivers. Like the observed experience in Washington, other research investigating COVID-19 impacts on distracted driving are reporting increases in this high-risk behavior in the U.S. and internationally (Woods-Fry, et. al., 2020; Katrakazas, et. al., 2020).

Events in 2020 related to the COVID-19 response were unprecedented. This report addresses a question posed by Vingilis, et. al. (2020) for all road safety professionals "what can we learn about road safety in general from the natural experiment afforded by transiently but substantially reduced traffic levels?" (p. 2). Indeed, across the U.S. traffic volumes were reduced so quickly and dramatically it is unlikely to be replicated. Compared to the previous year, in Washington VMT declined as much as 60 percent on some days. Driving patterns shifted overnight (along with driving behaviors) creating new challenges for traffic safety professionals. These changing patterns and challenges may be different from state to state based on different levels of statewide response and restrictions. Figure 1 is a high-level timeline of Washington's COVID-19 response and statewide restrictions.

Figure 1. Washington State COVID-19 Response Timeline



The remainder of this report explores these COVID-19 response impacts on distracted driving in Washington State throughout the year 2020. Each section of this report addresses the following questions:

1) Did distracted driving behavior change during the COVID-19 response? This question is addressed using Washington's observation survey of distracted drivers conducted in June of each year.

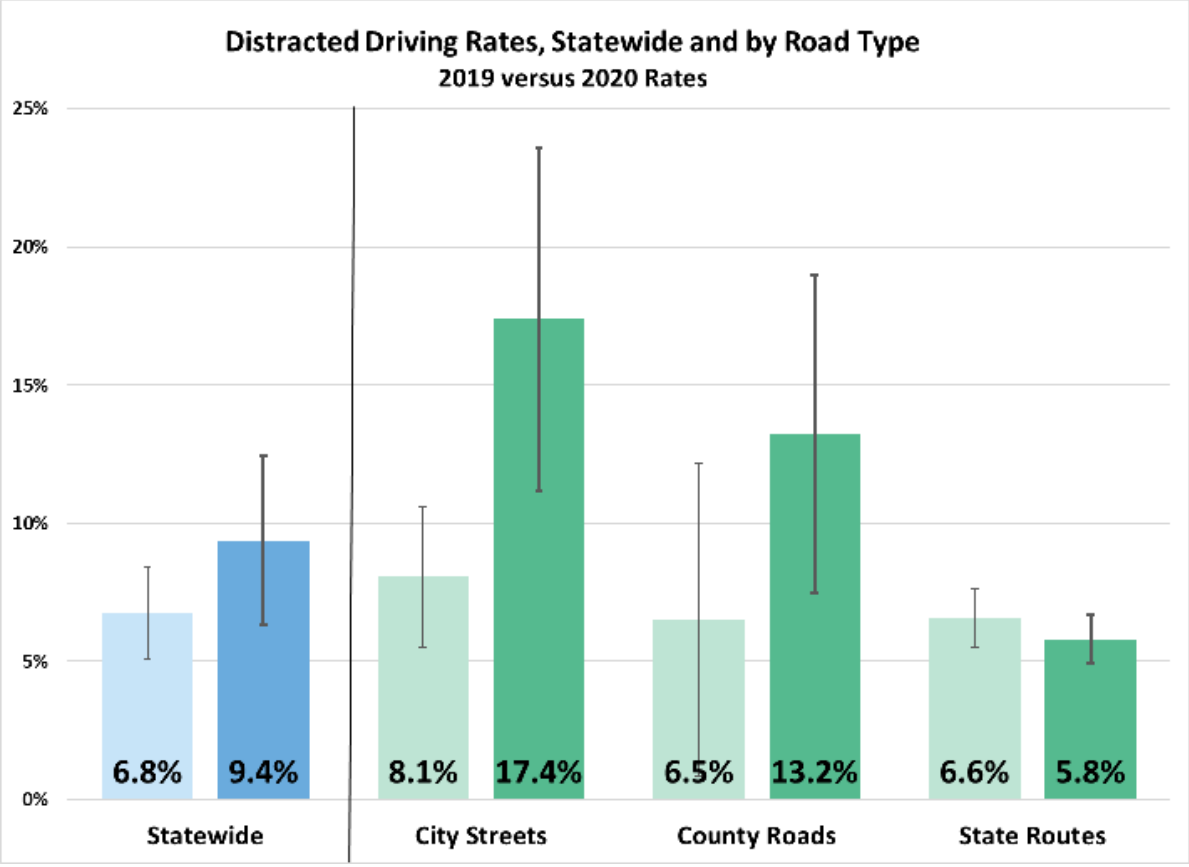
2) Did the COVID-19 response impact enforcement of Washington's distracted driving laws? Monthly trends for case filings (citations) are analyzed in relation to the timeline above.

3) Were there less distracted driver-involved traffic fatalities and serious injuries during COVID-19 response due to significant decreases in traffic? Fatal and serious injuries are analyzed by month and within the context of a crash coding form change and an increase in speeding crashes.

Distracted Driving Behavior: Observation Survey Results

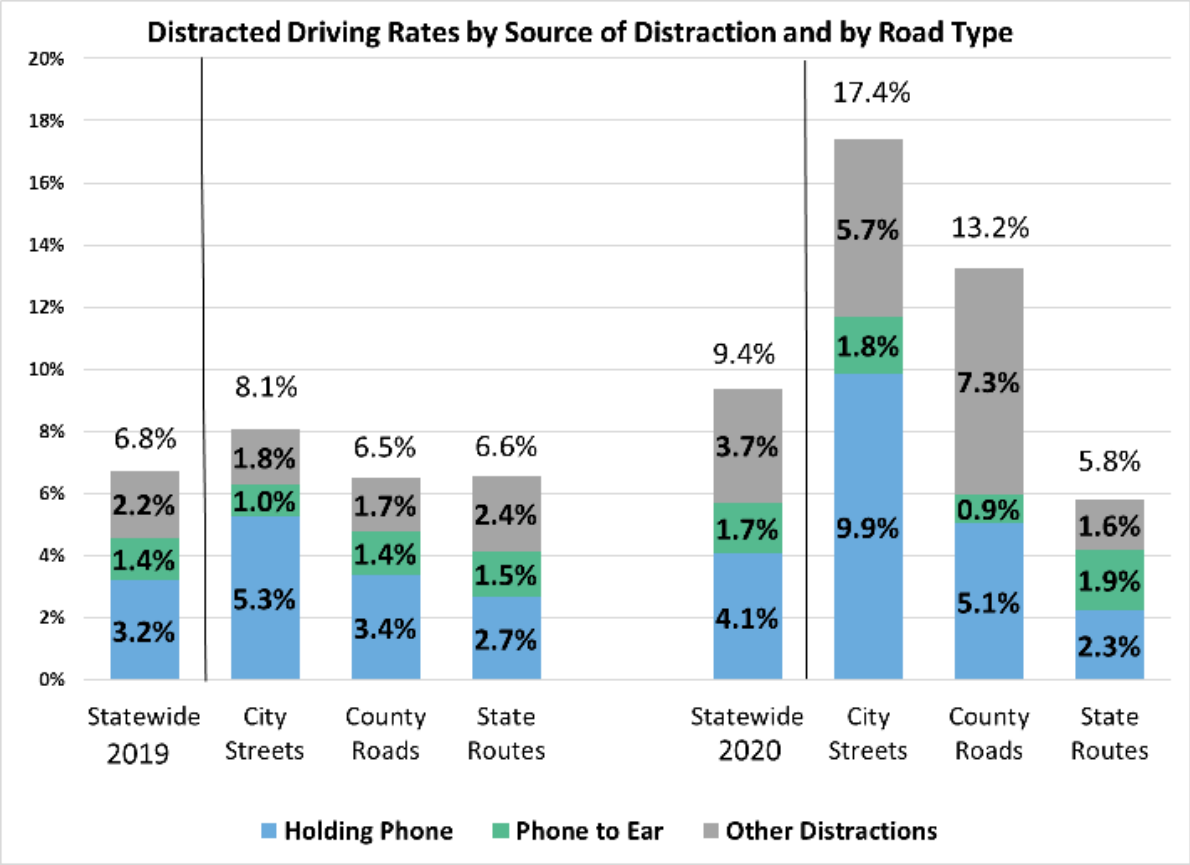
Beginning in 2019 the driver distraction observation survey method was updated to collect data on all road types across the state, whereas for three years prior the survey was conducted only at controlled intersections (WTSC, 2018). The change created a new baseline measure of observed driver distractions. This section includes a comparison of results from the 2020 survey to the baseline 2019 survey.

Figure 2. Driver Distraction Rates (Percent of Drivers) by Road Type



As shown in Figure 2, the statewide distracted driver rate increased nearly three percentage points in 2020, from 6.8 percent to 9.4 percent of all drivers. Although this change to the statewide rate was not statistically significant, the results certainly indicate an increase in this high-risk behavior. This is evident when considering the more than double rate increase that occurred in distracted driving behavior on city streets, soaring from less than one of every ten drivers to nearly one of every five drivers, an increase that is statistically significant. A similar double-the-rate increase occurred on county roads but remains lower than the city rate (13.2 percent versus 17.4 percent). During the same time, there was a slight decrease in distracted driving behavior on state routes (highways and freeways). Reasons for these increases and differences between road types is further explored by reviewing source of distraction below (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Source of Driver Distraction by Road Type (Percent of Drivers)



The 2020 statewide distracted driving rate increase was influenced by an increase in cell phone use while driving (holding phone) and an increase in non-cell phone related distractions (a phone is not observed, but the driver's eyes and general attention is not focused on the task of driving), shown as "other distractions" in Figure 3. In 2020 drivers observed holding a phone increased by 28 percent from 3.2 percent to 4.1 percent, and "other distractions" increased 68 percent from 2.2 percent to 3.7 percent of drivers. There was a modest increase in drivers observed holding the phone to the ear, up from 1.4 percent to 1.7 percent of drivers. A similar pattern was observed on city streets and county roads. The 2020 observation survey revealed three significant changes in 2020 regarding distracted driving behavior.

Cell phone use while driving increased on city streets and county roads.

On city streets, cell phone use (holding the phone and phone to ear) while driving increased 86 percent from 6.3 percent to 11.7 percent of drivers. On county roads, cell phone use increased 25 percent from 4.8 percent to six percent of all drivers. Cell phone use on state routes remained the same at 4.2 percent. The increases observed on city streets and county roads is likely related to decreased enforcement, a clear sign that deterrence for cell phone use while driving waned during COVID-19 response. Enforcement impacts from COVID-19 are discussed further later in this report. In addition to decreased enforcement, decreases in traffic volumes may have influenced driver behavior. With less

cars on the road to interact with, drivers may have been more likely to engage in distracting behaviors. Indeed, a survey of drivers in 2020 revealed that 6.8 percent of respondents reported being more likely to drive distracted during COVID-19 response timeframes than before the pandemic (TIRF USA, 2020).

The frequency of "other distractions" increased on city streets and county roads.

In 2020 the frequency at which drivers were observed engaging in non-cell phone related distraction more than doubled on city streets and more than tripled on county roads. Just like cell phone use, drivers may have been more likely to engage in distracting behaviors when there are less cars on the road to interact with, lessening their attention on driving. Among the 6.8 percent of respondents reporting being more likely to drive distracted during the pandemic, "competing thoughts unrelated to driving" was the most frequently cited primary reason for distraction (TIRF USA, 2020).

The frequency of "other distractions" decreased on state routes (highways and freeways).

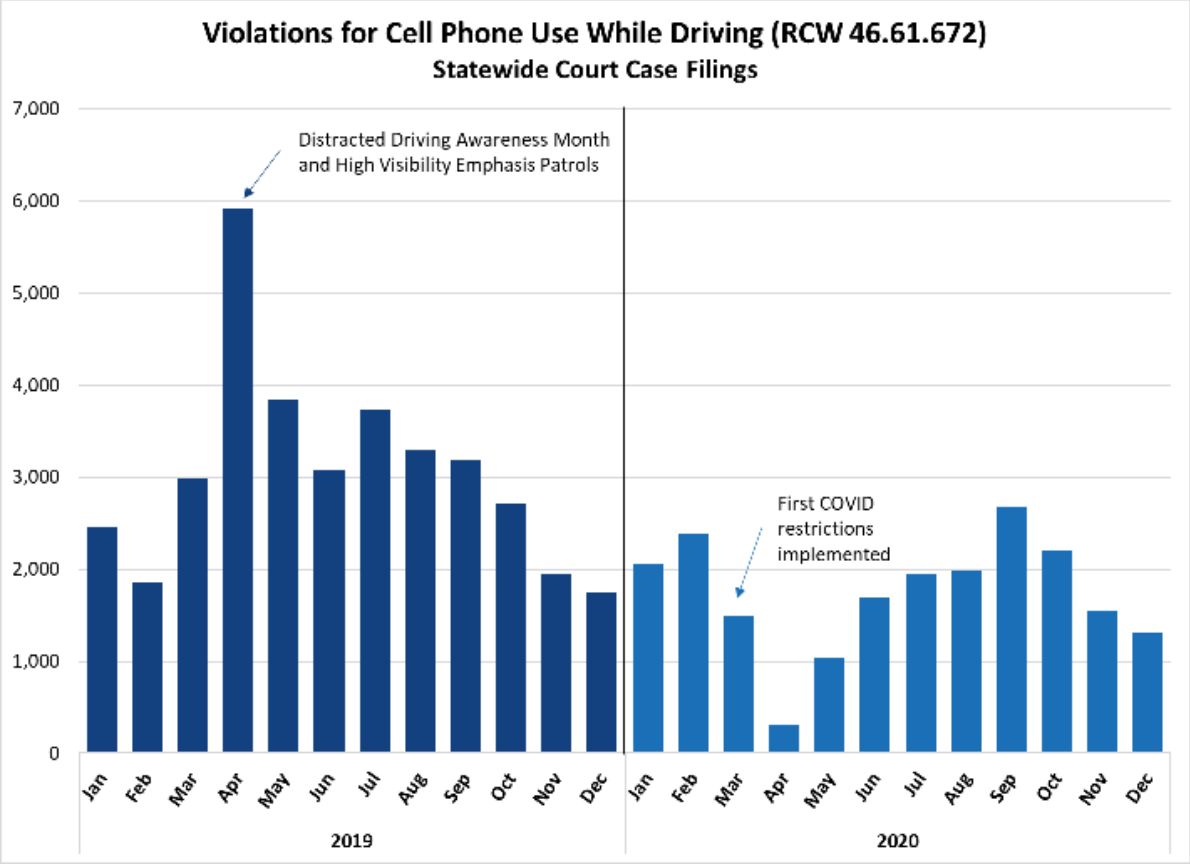
Cell phone use on state routes remained unchanged at 4.2 percent in 2020; however, there was a slight decrease in the frequency of non-cell phone related distraction. A possible explanation may be that speeding on state routes increased during pandemic response due to decreases in vehicle volumes. At the time of the survey in June 2020, VMT were still approximately 10 percent lower than the same time in 2019. Although VMT was lower, there was still more vehicle travel on state routes than on city streets or county roads, meaning there was still plenty of vehicles for drivers to interact with. Having to pay attention to other drivers, and traveling at a higher speed, may have influenced drivers on state routes to engage in distracting behavior less.

Distracted Driving Enforcement Before and During COVID-19

In 2017 Washington enacted strict restrictions on electronic device use while driving (RCW 46.61.672). Prior to 2017 Washington law banned text messaging and limited hand-held cell phone use while driving, which was limited in scope and language. Beginning in 2018, enforcement of electronic device use while driving increased almost 70 percent from the previous year resulting in nearly 34,000 citations. This upward trend in enforcement continued through 2019 with over 37,000 citations, a 10 percent increase from 2018.

April is distracted driving awareness month. Washington law enforcement issued more distracted driving citations during the April 2019 distracted driving enforcement campaign than any other month since Washington's first "texting" law became a primary offense in 2010 (WTSC, 2020). By contrast, the least amount of tickets issued in one month occurred in April 2020 (Figure 4). The reduction in enforcement was most pronounced in April since Washington's first COVID-19 restrictions were implemented in March 2020 (Figure 1). Distracted driving enforcement slowly increased each month through the summer and fall, however no months after March 2020 reached previous year levels.

Figure 4: Case Filings for Cell Phone Use While Driving 2019-2020



As discussed in the next section, monthly crash patterns shifted slightly in 2020. Distracted driver-involved death and injury typically peaks in July. In 2020 however, the peak occurred in August. Washington conducted a distracted driving high visibility enforcement campaign in September 2020, partially in response to rising crash trends. One-third of all distracted driving citations issued in 2020 occurred in August, September, and October.

Washington enacted a secondary penalty for dangerously distracted driving (RCW 46.61.673), or engaging in any activity not related to the actual operation of a motor vehicle in a manner that interferes with the safe operation of the vehicle. A secondary penalty can be issued once a driver has been apprehended for the suspected violation of a primary traffic infraction. In 2019 there were 706 dangerously distracted driving case filings, and in 2020 this declined to 554 (a 22 percent decrease).

Using an electronic device while driving is a primary traffic offense and despite over 20,000 citations issued in 2020, this was still a 44 percent decrease compared to citations issued in 2019. Second and subsequent offenses of using an electronic device while driving result in a penalty that is twice the amount of the initial penalty. There was little change in the number of second and subsequent offenses issued in 2020. Law enforcement issued 332 second/subsequent citations in 2019, and in 2020 they issued 323, a change of less than three percent. Even during COVID-19 restrictions, law enforcement were able to apprehend and penalize frequent violators of distracted driving laws.

In addition to COVID-19 response, law enforcement faced a myriad of other challenges in 2020 related to social unrest in response to civilian deaths involving law enforcement. Community demands for defunding and reform further impacted traffic enforcement. The Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) released a statement in September 2020 reiterating their support for the proven role that traffic enforcement and the wider criminal justice system plays in preventing deadly and dangerous crashes. In this statement, GHSA "vehemently" condemned racism in all its forms and also any unprovoked violence towards law enforcement. GHSA does not recommend the removal of enforcement from the highway safety equation, but rather offered several recommendations supporting law enforcement training, accountability, and social programs (GHSA, 2020). During this period of reform and improvement, highway safety offices will find ways to "individually and collectively ensure fair and equitable enforcement [of traffic laws]".

Distracted Driver-involved Crashes

Analysts and data users suspect that distraction involvement in crashes is generally under-reported, especially distraction crashes related to cell phone use. From 2007 to 2019, when distraction was indicated on the PTCR, in two-thirds of cases the distraction was coded as "Inattention." In 2020 changes were implemented on the PTCR to improve distracted driving reporting in crashes. Notably, "Inattention" was removed and replaced with a similar code "Lost in Thought/Day-dreaming". In addition, codes indicating the specific source of distraction now appeared first in the list. Figure 5 on the following page shows the specific changes to the PTCR crash contributing circumstances implemented January 1, 2020.

One intent of the PTCR changes was to improve information about the source of driver distractions. However, most of the "Inattention" coding was just displaced to other nonspecific distraction coding. As shown in Figure 5, the use of "Other Distractions" and "Unknown Distraction" in 2020 largely replaced the use of "Inattention" in 2019.

Figure 5: Use of Select Distracted Driver Crash Contributing Circumstances Codes

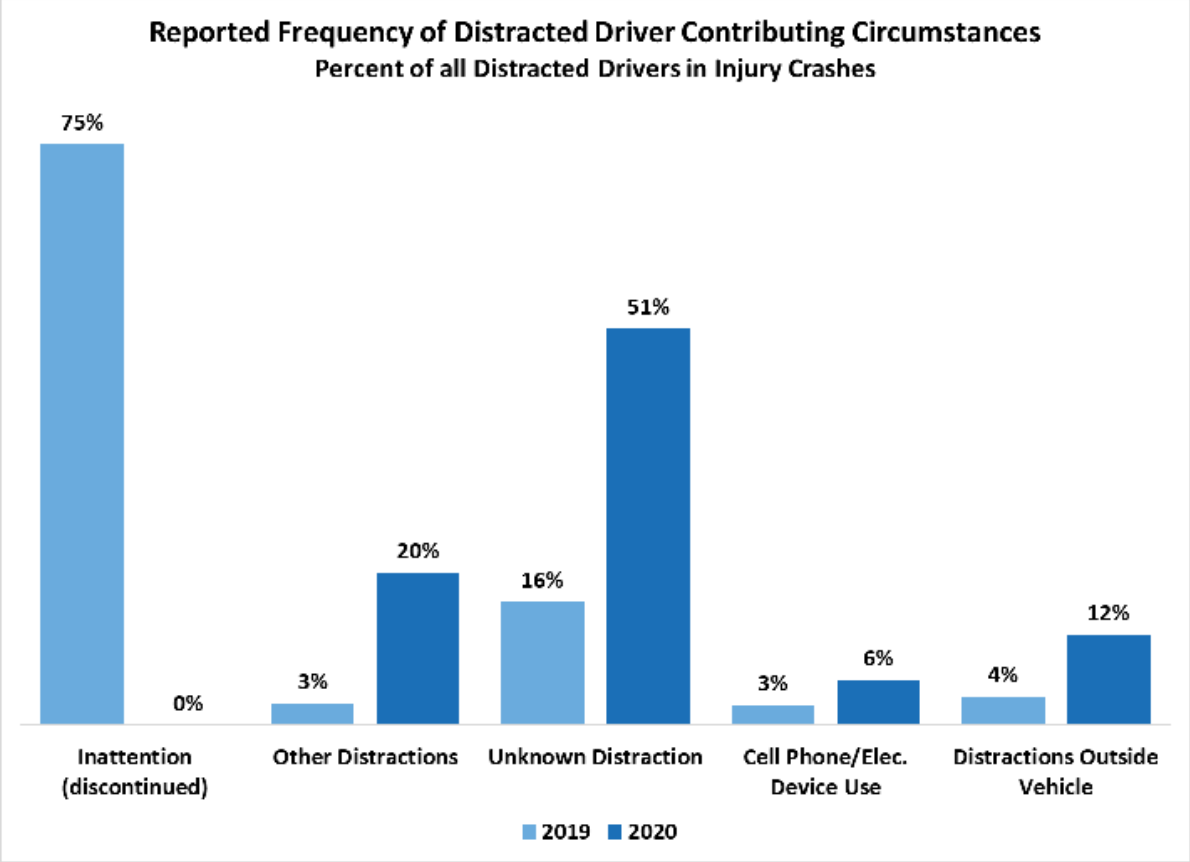
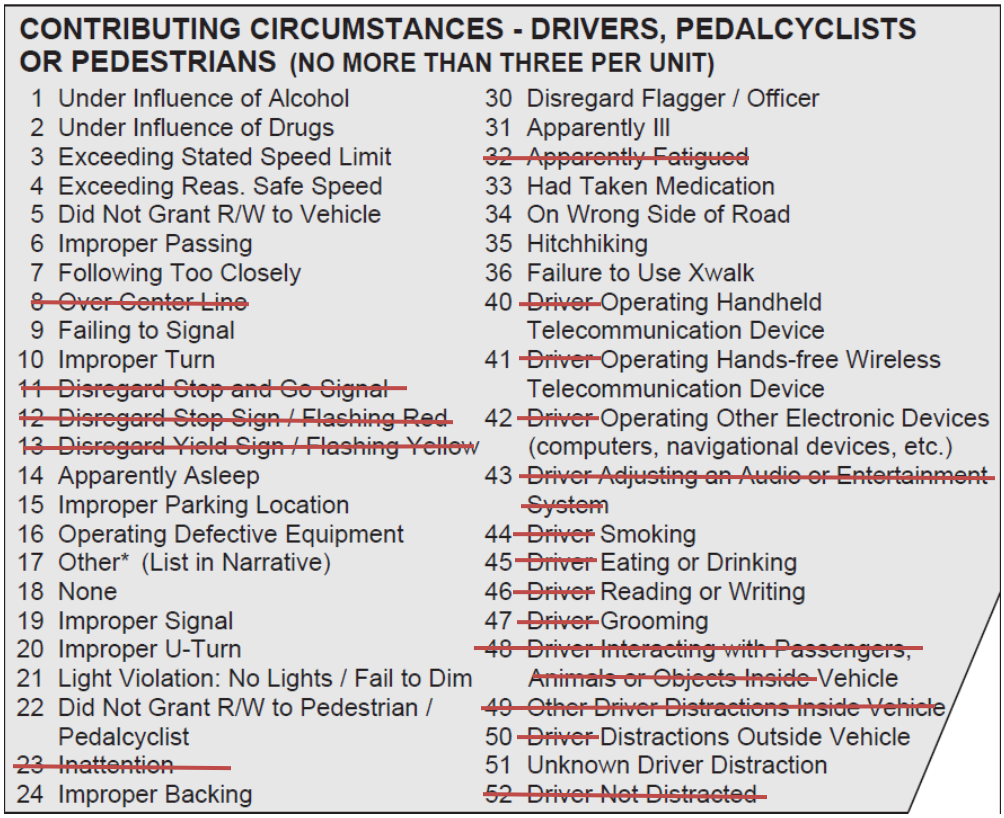


Figure 6: Police Traffic Collision Report Contributing Circumstances Coding Changes

2007-2019 with modifications in Red



CONTRIBUTING CIRCUMSTANCES - DRIVERS, PEDALCYCLISTS OR PEDESTRIANS (NO MORE THAN THREE PER UNIT)

1 Under Influence of Alcohol
2 Under Influence of Drugs
3 Exceeding Stated Speed Limit
4 Exceeding Reas. Safe Speed
5 Did Not Grant R/W to Vehicle
6 Improper Passing
7 Following Too Closely
~~8 Over Center Line~~
9 Failing to Signal
10 Improper Turn
~~11 Disregard Stop and Go Signal~~
~~12 Disregard Stop Sign / Flashing Red~~
~~13 Disregard Yield Sign / Flashing Yellow~~
14 Apparently Asleep
15 Improper Parking Location
16 Operating Defective Equipment
17 Other* (List in Narrative)
18 None
19 Improper Signal
20 Improper U-Turn
21 Light Violation: No Lights / Fail to Dim
22 Did Not Grant R/W to Pedestrian / Pedalcyclist
~~23 Inattention~~
24 Improper Backing
30 Disregard Flagger / Officer
31 Apparently Ill
~~32 Apparently Fatigued~~
33 Had Taken Medication
34 On Wrong Side of Road
35 Hitchhiking
36 Failure to Use Xwalk
40 ~~Driver~~ Operating Handheld Telecommunication Device
41 ~~Driver~~ Operating Hands-free Wireless Telecommunication Device
42 ~~Driver~~ Operating Other Electronic Devices (computers, navigational devices, etc.)
43 ~~Driver Adjusting an Audio or Entertainment System~~
44 ~~Driver~~ Smoking
45 ~~Driver~~ Eating or Drinking
46 ~~Driver~~ Reading or Writing
47 ~~Driver~~ Grooming
~~48 Driver Interacting with Passengers, Animals or Objects Inside~~ Vehicle
~~49 Other Driver Distractions Inside Vehicle~~
50 ~~Driver~~ Distractions Outside Vehicle
51 Unknown Driver Distraction
~~52 Driver Not Distracted~~

2020 Forward with New Codes Highlighted

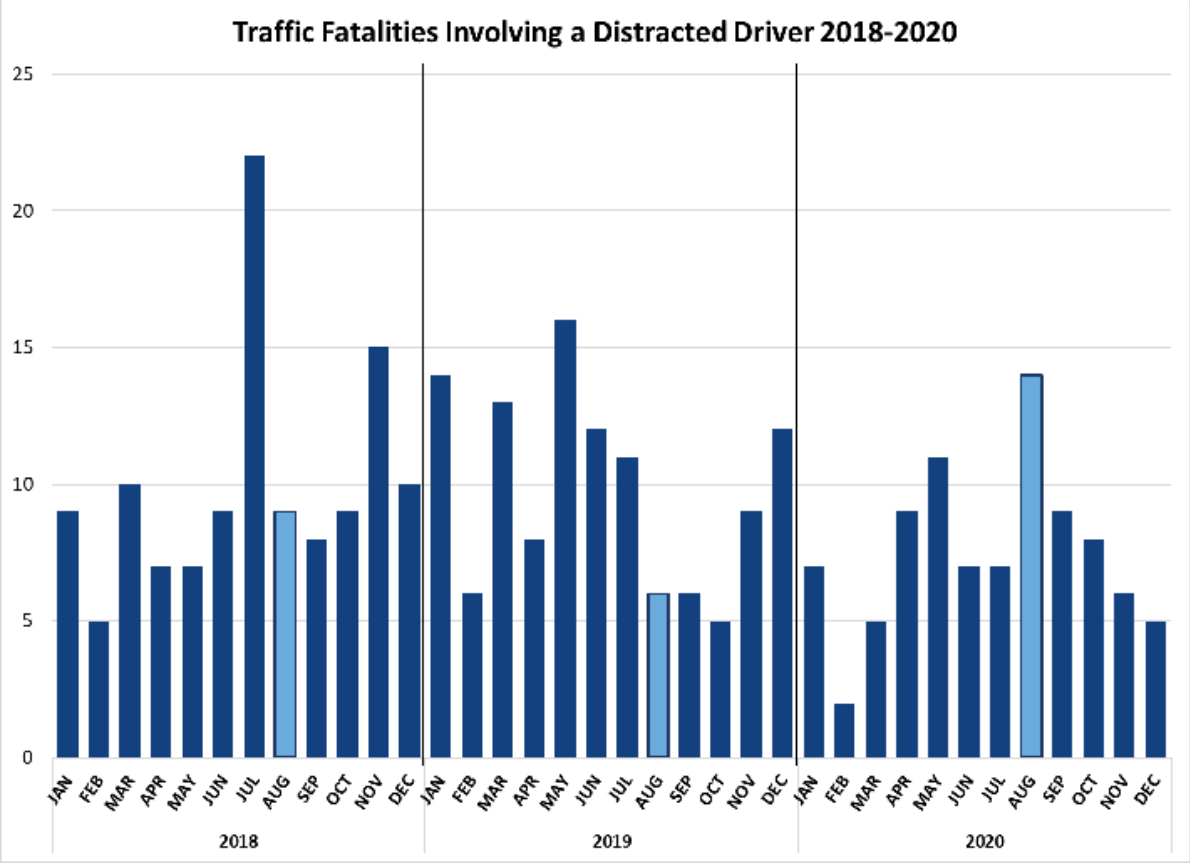
CONTRIBUTING CIRCUMSTANCES - DRIVERS, PEDALCYCLISTS OR PEDESTRIANS (NO MORE THAN THREE PER UNIT)

1 Under Influence of Alcohol
2 Under Influence of Drugs
3 Exceeding Stated Speed Limit
4 Exceeding Reas. Safe Speed
5 Did Not Grant R/W to Vehicle
6 Improper Passing
7 Following Too Closely
9 Failing to Signal
10 Improper Turn/Merge
14 Apparently Asleep or Fatiqued
15 Improper Parking Location
16 Operating Defective Equipment
17 Other Contributing Circ Not Listed
18 None
19 Improper Signal
20 Improper U-Turn
21 Light Violation: No Lights/Fail to Dim
22 Did Not Grant R/W to Non Motorist
24 Improper Backing
30 Disregard Flagger / Officer
31 Apparently Ill
33 Had Taken Medication
34 Non Motorist on Wrong Side of Road
35 Hitchhiking
36 Failure to Use Xwalk
40 Operating Handheld Cell Phone
41 Operating Hands-Free Cell Phone
42 Operating Other Electronic Devices (Computer, Navigation, etc.)
44 Smoking
45 Eating or Drinking
46 Reading or Writing
47 Grooming
50 Distractions Outside Vehicle
51 Unknown Distraction
53 Lost in Thought / Day Dreaming
54 Distracted by Other Occupant
55 Distracted by Adjusting Vehicle Cntrls
56 Other Distractions
60 Disregard Traffic Sign and Signals
62 Apparently Emotional (Depressed, Angry, Disturbed, etc.)
63 Physically Impaired
64 Racing
65 Operating Reckless or Aggressively
66 Overcorrecting / Oversteering

Among injury crashes occurring in 2020, coding of cell phone specific distractions increased from three percent to six percent of distracted drivers. There was also an increase in the use of "Distractions Outside the Vehicle". Even though identifying the specific source of driver distraction is difficult, removing the "inattention" code may have increased the use of the more specific source of distraction codes. An alternative explanation (given that observed cell phone use while driving increased in 2020) is that cell phone use did increase as a factor in injury crashes. It will be difficult to assess impacts from PTCR changes versus COVID-19 response due to the proximity of these events. Likely these trends are a result of both.

Overall, in 2020 distracted driver-involved fatalities decreased 24 percent (Figure 7) and serious injuries decreased 29 percent (Figure 8). However, the largest distracted driver-involved fatality reductions in 2020 were realized in the months January – March, prior to significant COVID-19 impacts. Fatalities during these months were more than half compared to 2019. April and August – October had increases in distracted driver-involved fatalities. So, although fatalities were down for the year, this reduction was likely due to the implementation of the PTCR changes which impacted the early months of 2020. As law enforcement became more aware of the PTCR changes, the impact on reporting diminished. And it seems the increase in distracted driving behavior became evident in fatal crashes by summer.

Figure 7: Traffic Fatalities Involving a Distracted Driver by Month



This same pattern was not revealed among serious injuries. Every month in 2020 (except January, February and August) there were less serious injuries involving a distracted driver than in 2019. However, another clear pattern emerged which is present among both fatal and serious injury crashes. An analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed that a statistically significant inverse relationship exists for contributing circumstance reporting between distracted and speeding among crash-involved drivers. In other words, the higher the prevalence of speeding as a crash contributing circumstance identified by law enforcement, the lower the prevalence of distracted driving as a contributing circumstance. Statistically, this relationship was somewhat significant among fatal and serious injury crashes during the years 2018-2019, but in 2020 the correlation was strongly significant. This change in significance is likely due to the PTCR changes to distracted driving coding.

Figure 8: Traffic Serious Injuries Involving a Distracted Driver by Month

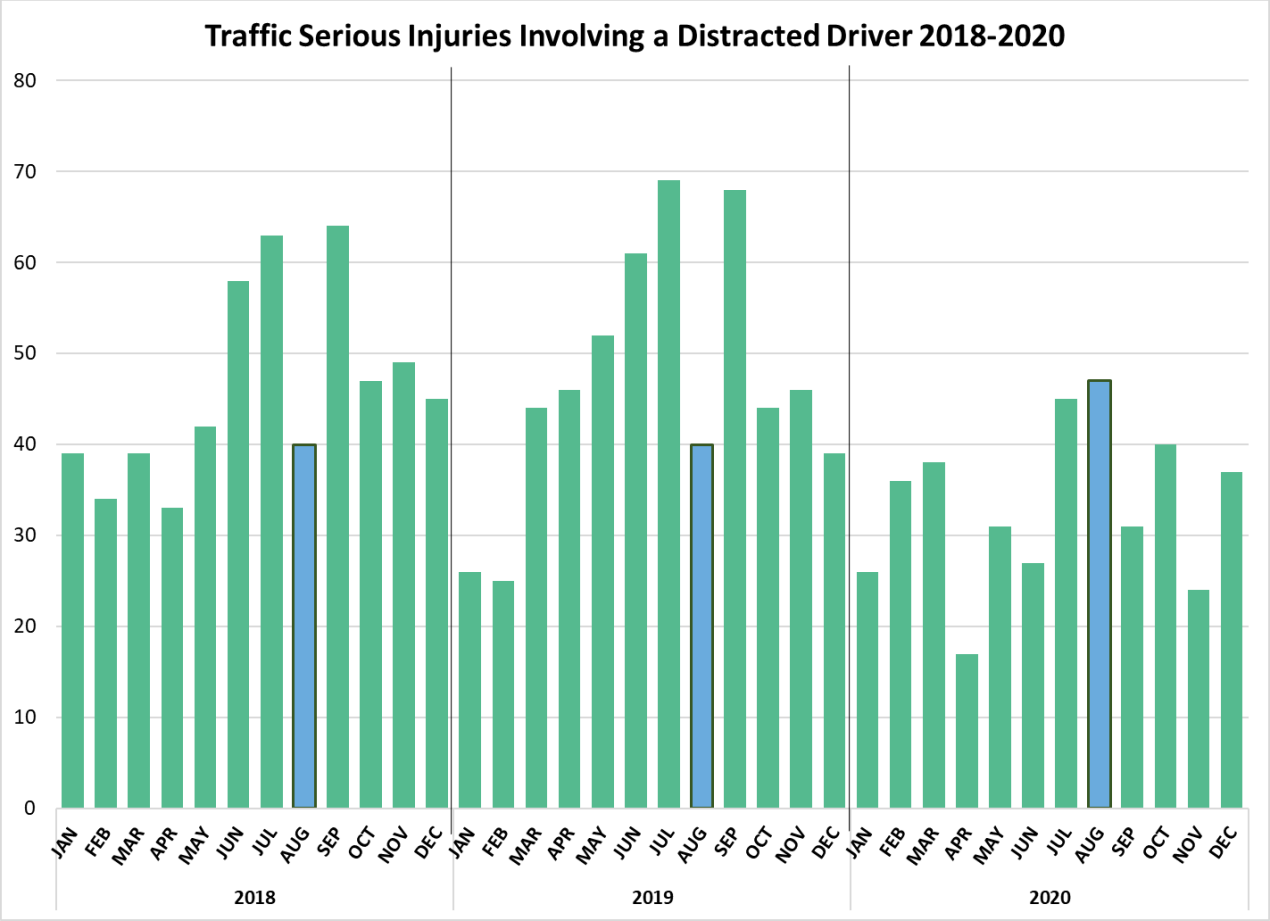
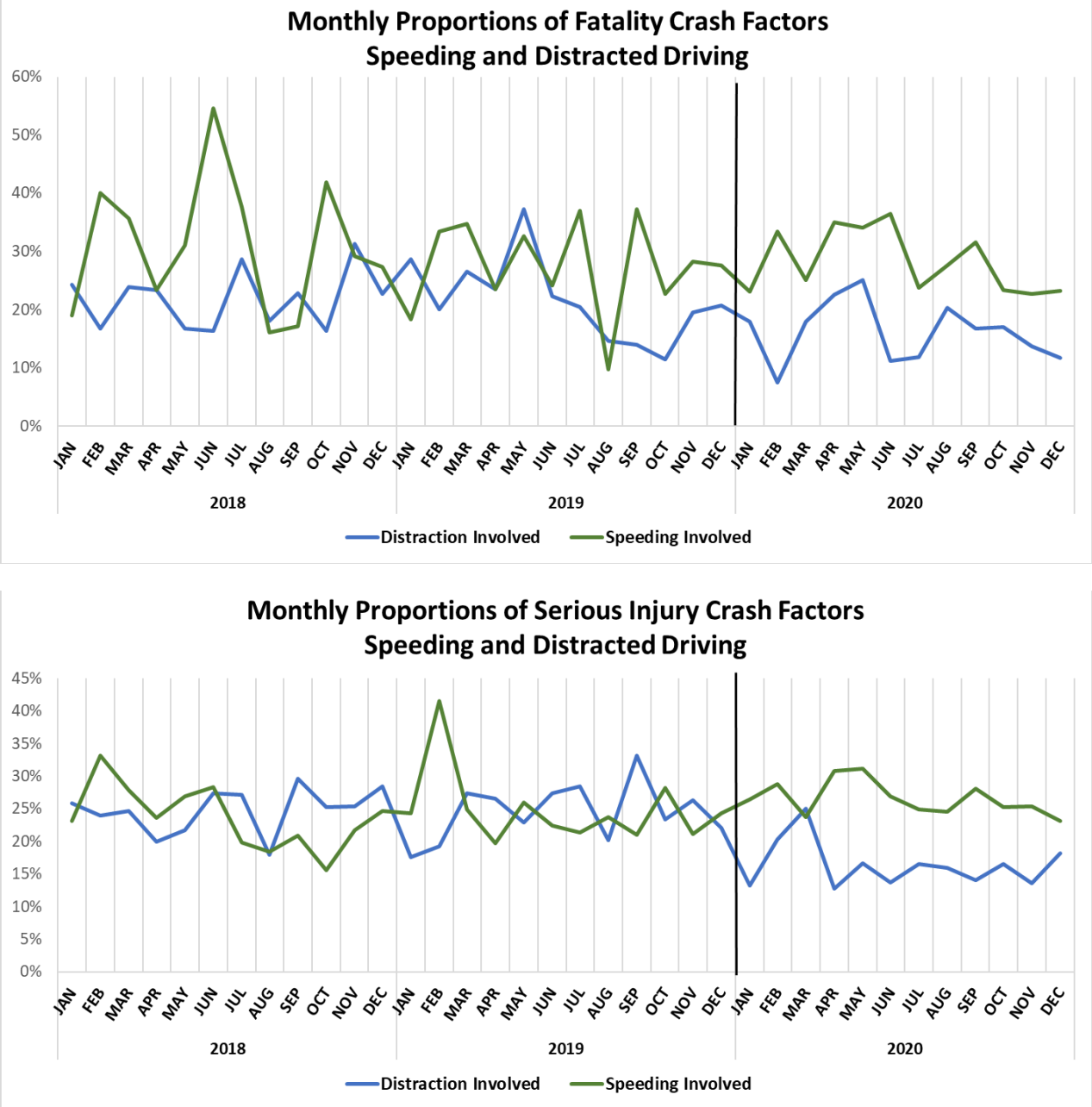


Figure 9 demonstrates the strength of the correlation between speeding and distracted driving prevalence in crashes. In 2020 when speeding was high, distraction was low. Perhaps one explanation is that speeding behavior – especially extreme speeding behavior – increased in 2020. When speeding is a contributing circumstance in a crash, investigators may not be looking for distraction as both behaviors result in loss of control, roadway departures, and other similar crash outcomes. In 2020 speeding as a factor in fatal crashes did not change much but increased 18 percent among serious injuries. This might

explain why the monthly patterns for fatalities and serious injuries during COVID-19 differs. While it might seem at first glance that distracted driving has declined, it is likely due to PTCR changes and an increase in speeding creating an "overshadowing" effect on distracted driving reporting in crashes.

Figure 9: Proportions of Speeding versus Distracted Driver Crash Contributing Circumstances



Among both fatalities and serious injuries involving a distracted driver, August emerged as a historically deadly and dangerous month, highlighted in Figures 7 and 8 on the previous pages. In earlier years, the peak of summer, July, is typically a more deadly and dangerous month than August. The COVID-19 response timeline (Figure 1) offers some insight to this slight shift in monthly death and injury patterns.

Throughout May and June 2020, counties were progressing (some quickly) through reopening phases. After a spike in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations began to occur during this same time, on July 2 all county phase progressions were halted. In addition, phases two and three were modified to introduce tighter restrictions. Further restrictive phase modifications were made later in July and early August. In addition, a mask mandate was implemented at the end of June, and by July businesses were instructed to enforce the mask mandates among their patrons. These initial restrictions clearly had an impact on July as a deadly and dangerous month for distracted driving crashes. However, by August when the days began to get shorter and the weather cooler, there were several news reports of "COVID-19 fatigue". As restrictions were lifted during the early months of summer, and then instantly rolled back and modified to a more restrictive state in July, by August people were traveling more to find some escape from stay at home orders.

According to information from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT, 2021), travel volumes were down approximately 15 percent in July compared to 12 percent in August. Even though there were no changes in restrictions during the month of August, and county phase progression was still suspended, people were increasing travel exposure during the month of August 2020. By September, the distracted driving high visibility enforcement campaign was being conducted and families were preparing children for remote school instruction. This monthly trend is likely unique to 2020 and the COVID-19 response timeline. More data from 2021 and beyond will be needed to determine if more permanent adjustments to summertime programming and enforcement is needed.

Conclusion

The year 2020 was like no other with far reaching impacts to Washingtonians' health, safety, happiness, and livelihoods. Across all spectrums of health researchers will be trying to quantify and adjust to these impacts for years. Traffic safety can be measured based on risk exposure, in other words, the volume of VMT. Logically, if there is a decrease in risk exposure, then a decrease in the negative outcomes associated with that exposure should follow. But traffic safety is more complex than just risk exposure because human behavior is complex. This report sought to explore the impact "the natural experiment of transiently but substantially reduced traffic levels", as described by Vingilis, et. al. (2020), had on distracted driving in Washington State.

Did distracted driving behavior change during the COVID-19 response?

YES. Washington's observation survey of distracted driving conducted in June 2020 revealed significant increases in cell phone use while driving and the incidence of "other distractions" on city streets and county roads. While rates of distraction remained largely unchanged on state routes, the changes in driver behavior on local and county roads drove the statewide distracted driving rate up nearly three percentage points, from 6.8 to 9.4 percent. It is possible that a decrease in traffic led to an increase in distracted driving behavior since there were less cars on the road to interact with, giving drivers a false sense of security to engage in distracted driving.

Did the COVID-19 response impact enforcement of Washington's distracted driving laws?

YES. Citations issued by law enforcement declined 44 percent in 2020 compared to 2019 which was the highest number of distracted driving citations ever issued in a single year. Just over 20,000 distracted driving citations were issued in 2020, compared to over 37,000 in 2019. A myriad of law enforcement challenges were introduced in 2020 such as limiting direct contact with the public (including proactive traffic enforcement) due to COVID-19, and social unrest unraveling law enforcement and community relations. Community and law enforcement leaders around the country are working to mend and improve relations and many law enforcement agencies in Washington have reengaged in proactive traffic enforcement.

Were there less distracted driver-involved traffic fatalities and serious injuries during COVID-19 response due to significant decreases in traffic?

NO. Reviewing 2020, distracted driver involved fatalities declined 24 percent and serious injuries declined 29 percent. Unfortunately, these reductions are not a result of a change in driver behavior nor distracted driving becoming any less dangerous. The largest monthly reductions in distracted driver-involved fatalities occurred prior to COVID-19 response and traffic reductions, most likely influenced by a change to the crash reporting form. In several months following COVID-19 response (including April which had the lowest traffic volumes during the response), there was an increase in distracted driver-involved fatalities compared to 2019. This trend is in line with the results that revealed distracted driving behavior increased and enforcement decreased in 2020.

Speeding in serious injury crashes increased 18 percent in 2020. There is a significant negative correlation between speeding and distracted driving crash contributing circumstances coding. When speeding is high, distraction is low. Speeding and distracted driving result in similar crash characteristics, such as loss of control, overcorrecting, and roadway departure. Decreased traffic volumes led to more driver risk-taking, especially traveling at extreme speeds. Given the increase in speeding behavior during COVID-19 response and increase in serious injury crashes, distraction was likely "overshadowed" as a factor contributing to crashes.

Impacts from COVID-19 continue to persist as the virus persists. At the time of this report, Washington is progressing through focused tiers of vaccine administration with the goal to have a COVID-19 vaccine available to all Washington adults by this summer. Looking forward to the rest of 2021 and even beyond, COVID-19 response will continue to impact traffic safety and driver behavior. The shifting trends identified in this report will need to be monitored to determine if these changes are transient or permanent, and how programming may need to be adjusted to respond to current trends. Regardless of these new challenges and changes, the goal remains Target Zero. Our efforts will not cease until every Washington transportation system user reaches their destination safely every time.

Appendix A: References

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