TRAFFIC SAFETY COMMISSION

Brief Number 19
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Spotter Patrols and Distracted Driving

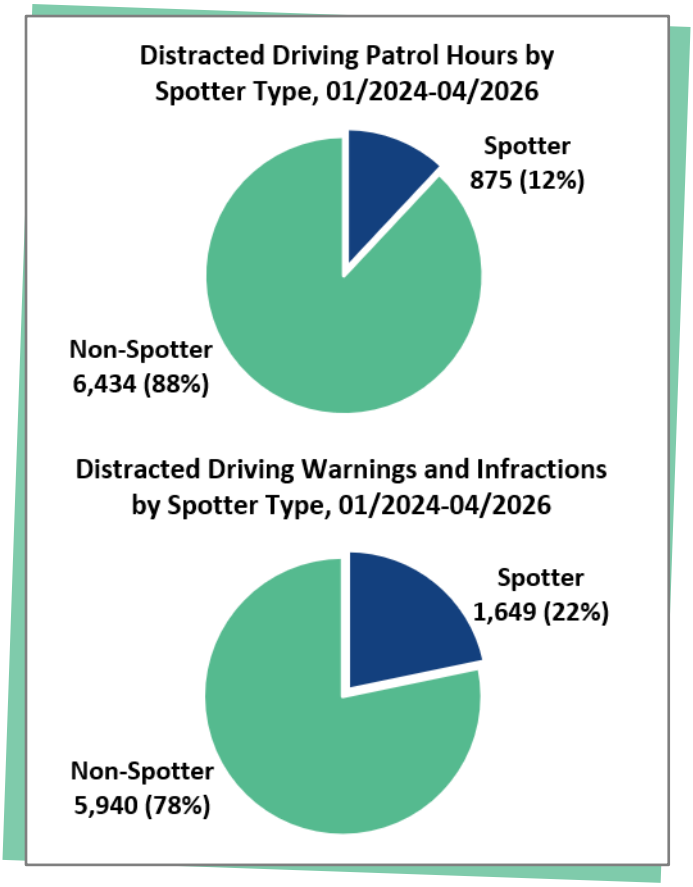
Distracted driving is a persistent issue on Washington roads—one that has cost 241 lives since 2024. April is National Distracted Driving Awareness Month where increased law enforcement and media campaigns remind drivers to put distractions away and focus on the road while driving.

Law enforcement officers use High-Visibility Enforcement (HVE) to deter distracted driving and change unlawful traffic behavior. An HVE patrol is a period when officers conduct traffic stops for certain violations. One HVE strategy involves the use of a spotter patrol. A spotter patrol consists of a spotter, and several enforcement units staged a short distance from the spotter's location. The spotter positions themselves at a location where they can observe passing vehicles for distracted driving violations. The spotter calls out violations to the enforcement units who then stop the distracted driver.

From January 1, 2024, to April 30, 2026, there were 1,405 distracted driving HVE patrols conducted throughout Washington, resulting in 7,589 warnings and infractions. Of these patrols, 13 percent (n=183) employed a spotter and 87 percent (n=1,222) did not.

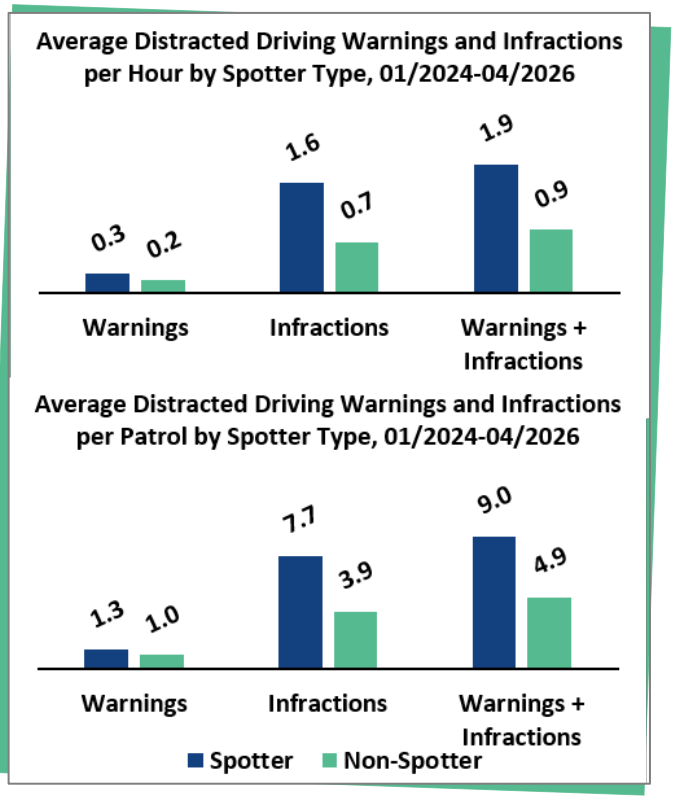
Did you know?

- Spotter patrols can result in higher levels of observed violations.
- Although spotter patrols accounted for 13 percent of all distracted driving HVE patrol hours, they accounted for 22 percent of all distracted driving warnings and infractions.
- The average hours per patrol were slightly lower among distracted driving HVE patrols using a spotter (4.8 hours per patrol) compared to those that did not use a spotter (5.3 hours per patrol).
- Spotter patrols yielded twice as many distracted driving warnings and infractions per hour compared to non-spotter patrols.

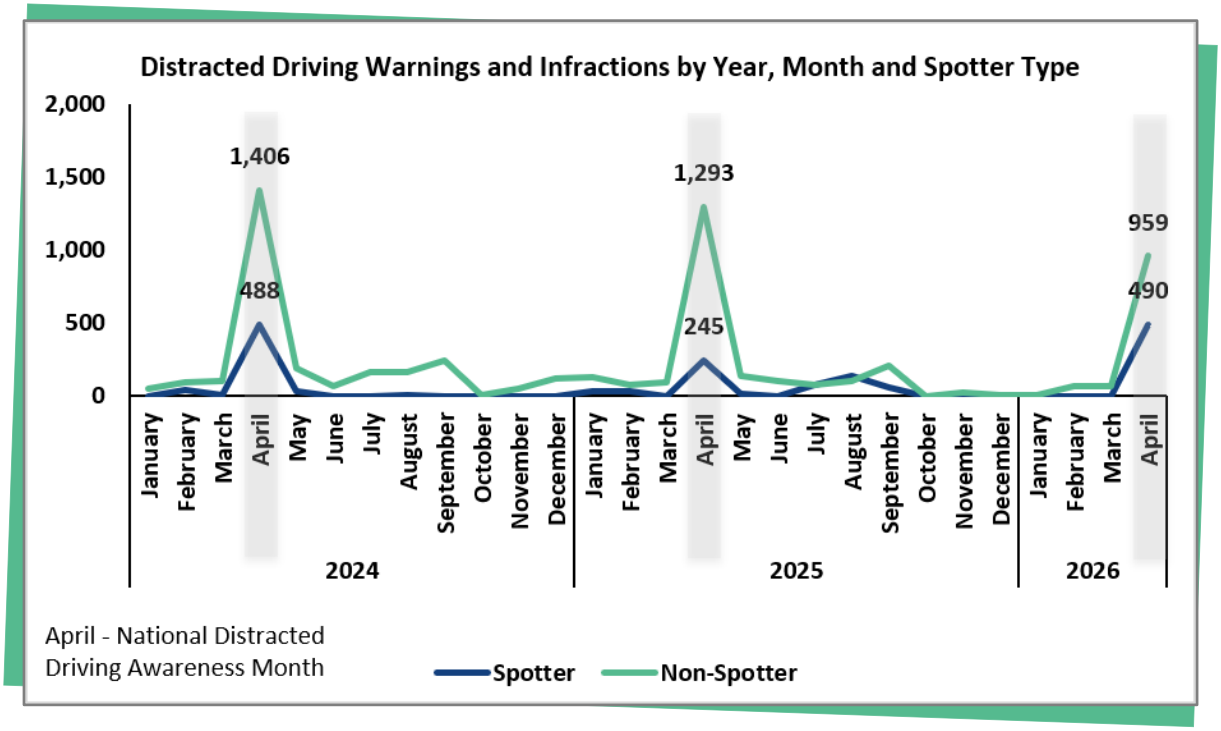


Spotter patrols for distracted driving yielded an average of 1.9 warnings and infractions per hour compared to 0.9 per hour amongst non-spotter patrols. Spotter patrols averaged about 9 distracted driving warnings and infractions per patrol compared to an average of 4.9 among non-spotter patrols.

Distracted driving HVE patrols using a spotter resulted in 2.5 contacts per hour while non-spotter patrols resulted in 2.3 contacts per hour. Among spotter patrols, 11 percent of contacts resulted in a distracted driving warning and 63 percent resulted in a distracted driving infraction. Among non-spotter patrols, 8 percent of contacts resulted in a distracted driving warning and 32 percent resulted in a distracted driving infraction. Other non-distraction warnings and/or infractions may have been given.



Among distracted driving non-spotter HVE patrols that recorded zero distracted driving warnings and infractions, speed warnings and infractions were most frequent. About one in four distracted driving non-spotter patrols recorded zero distracted driving warnings and infractions compared to four percent of distracted driving HVE patrols using a spotter.



Data Sources
WTSC HVE Activity Logs

Spotter Patrol Training

For more information, please contact the WTSC Research and Data Division at (360) 725-9860.