

Signs of texting while driving are hard for officers to read

From the San Jose Mercury News

It's easy for police to spot and ticket California drivers illegally holding cell phones to their ears. But if they are texting, it's a far different matter.

While an estimated 200,000 tickets have been issued in the past year to motorists not using a hands-free device, only a few hundred tickets have been written to drivers reading or sending a text message. That's because cops have a hard time knowing that drivers looking down at their laps are holding a phone and texting.

The Highway Patrol has issued only 580 texting tickets across the state since the texting ban went into effect Jan. 1.

That's no surprise, say traffic cops.

"With the exception of when I happen to pull up alongside someone texting at a stoplight," said San Jose police Sgt. Paul Woo, "it is difficult to distinguish between someone texting and someone just looking at his or her phone."

The low number of tickets, along with evidence that texting is on the rise, have safety officials worried. Texting is considered even more distracting than talking on the phone because a driver's eyes are not on the road.

A test by Car and Driver found that a car traveled 70 feet before a 37-year-old driver reacted to a red light while sending a text message, and 36 feet when reading one, at speeds ranging from 35 mph to 70 mph.

By comparison, that same driver reacted to a red light within four feet when legally drunk.

The concern over text messaging is certain to increase.

Car and Driver reports that 110.4 billion text messages were sent nationwide in December, a more than 10-fold increase from the 9.8 billion messages sent in December three years earlier.

Last month, North Carolina became the 14th state to ban all drivers from text messaging, double the number from a year ago.

The dangers are evident.

In May, a train operator in Boston admitted texting his girlfriend before a collision with another train that injured 50 people.

Last year, a train operator in Southern California had just sent a text message when his train rammed another, killing 25.

And two years ago a woman who was texting crashed into a line of cars at a construction site in Shasta County, killing another driver.

"I often see mostly teen girls staring intently into their laps at red lights, both hands out of sight, occasionally glancing around texting," said motorist Gary Garnier of Los Gatos. "It seems like I see this every trip I take."

Added Woo: "I have even witnessed a driver text with both hands and steer with their knees. Couple that with drivers trying to avoid detection by keeping their phone down low, and now their eyes are off the roadway and fixated below the dashboard reading their messages."

Traffic officials are hopeful that over time the risks of texting will lead to a decline in that behavior.

While it appears that more drivers are ignoring the hands-free and texting laws, a study released last week by the Automobile Club of Southern California indicated that the need to put down the phone while behind the wheel may be sinking in.

The auto club checked 13,500 vehicles along seven roads in Orange County and found that 9.3 percent of those drivers were using handheld phones before the law went into effect last summer.

That figure declined to 3.3 percent last July before rising to 3.9 percent this spring.

"Handheld cell-phone use appears to have crept up slowly over the months," said Steven Bloch, the auto club's senior traffic safety researcher.

"But contrary to a general perception of much higher usage, it's still far lower than it was before the law took effect a year ago."

Now, he and others hope, sanity will prevail.

"Texting and driving should not mix," said Barbara Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association. "We need to restore some common sense to driving."

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