

# Front Line

NEWS, TRENDS & TACTICS

## Don't text, or drink, behind the wheel

If you're thinking about texting while driving, it might be safer to take a drink instead.

Although nobody's advocating driving while intoxicated, research nationwide and at the Human Performance Lab of the University of Massachusetts shows that texting while driving is by far the most dangerous behind-the-wheel activity, said Matthew R.E. Romoser, a senior research assistant at the lab.

Texting while driving increases your chances of crashing more than 20 times over nondistracted driving, Romoser said. Meanwhile, using a cell phone, which doesn't involve as many glances away from the roadway, ups your chances of crashing by four to six times, which is comparable to intoxicated driving, he said.

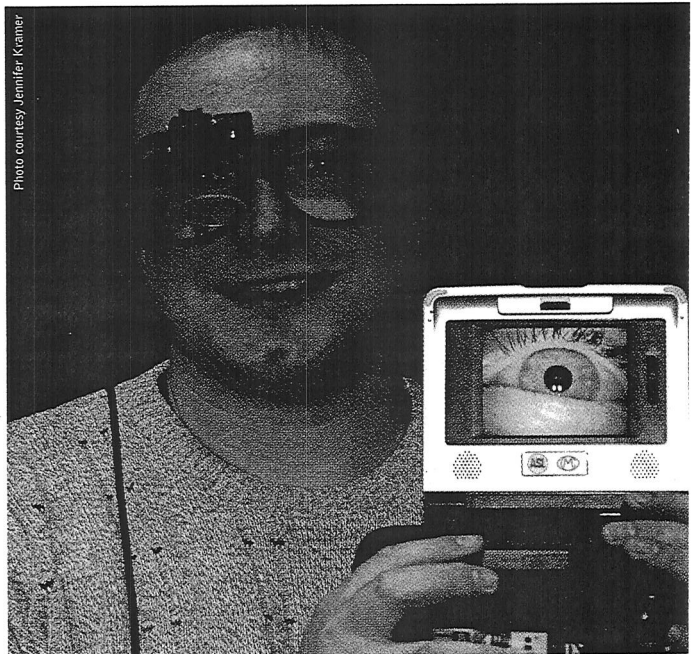
"So one could make the argument that texting while driving actually makes you more dangerous than intoxicated driving," Romoser said.

The lab has researched transportation human factors since its \$750,000 simulator opened in 1995. Lab research assistant Gautam Divekar, who is working toward his Ph.D. in industrial engineering and operations research at UMass, said the lab has examined various types of distracted driving, including tuning the radio, changing CDs, looking for things on the map, adjusting the air conditioner and finding change for the toll booth.

Divekar said about 60 percent of younger drivers look away for more than two seconds during in-vehicle distractions. About 25 percent of experienced drivers (21 and older) will look inside the car for more than two seconds. Those two seconds make it more likely that you will wreck.

Romoser said researchers hope to raise awareness of how dangerous distracted driving is and to train people how to manage their glances when they look away from the road. The lab is taking its forward concentration and attention learning program from the computer to the simulator, where some training with older drivers has improved target skills by almost 100 percent.

Twenty states ban text messaging for all drivers. Nine states prohibit text messaging by novice drivers and one state bans school bus drivers from texting while driving. In his view, legislation doesn't go far enough, Romoser said.



Matthew Romoser of the Human Performance Lab wears the eye tracker used during research on distracted driving.

He said research debunks the claims that talking on a cell phone is no worse than talking to a passenger and that hands-free phones eliminate the distractions.

First, a passenger is a second set of eyes that can look for hazards, and he or she can stop talking at busy intersections. Second, telephone conversations usually are more intense than a typical in-vehicle talk. People who talk on the phone often are dealing with planning business meetings, discussing contracts and setting up business details.

"The more cognitive workload capacity that you consume, the less likely it is that you're going to start scanning the side of the road," Romoser said. "And it also increases your reaction time."

Although a recent study at the University of Utah showed that maybe 2.5 percent of the population can drive and talk on a cell phone safely, Romoser said the concept of multitasking is overrated.

"You don't really multitask. You just switch your attention from one thing to another."