Driving can be fun, but mostly it is a utilitarian activity, often boring, but potentially lethal, particularly when the driver engages in a distracting secondary task such as texting (or emailing or dialing) (texting while driving [TWD]). Secondary tasks are not essential to the driving task and distracting to the extent they take the driver’s eyes and mind off the driving task. The longer a driver’s eyes are off the forward roadway for any reason, the greater the likelihood of a crash, a wayward glance of 2 seconds approximately doubling the risk of a crash [1,2]. When distracted in this manner a driver cannot see, identify, or respond to road hazards [3]. While the cognitive demands of the activity can reduce situational awareness [4], further delaying appropriate maneuvering after eyes return forward. Drivers engage in a wide range of secondary tasks [5], generally without serious consequence, but TWD is a particular problem because invariably it takes the driver’s eyes off the forward roadway in an activity that is cognitively demanding [3].

While adolescents might be expected to be particularly adept at TWD given their general facility with phone technology, it seems that novice teenage drivers, at least, may actually be worse at safely dividing their attention between texting and driving, tending to devote themselves wholly to the phone task until its completion without looking up [6] and may be more willing than older drivers to engage in secondary tasks like TWD in complex driving conditions [7]. Not surprisingly, the risk of a safety critical event when texting is greater among younger than experienced drivers [8].

The more often one engages in a dangerous behavior such as TWD the more likely a negative outcome. Thus, the prevalence of TWD is important. Mobile device use is ubiquitous, particularly among adolescents, who bring their routine use into the driving task. Therefore, the prevalence of TWD is particularly high among young drivers, whose crash risk in general is higher than other age groups owing to inexperience, young age, risk taking, and other factors [9]. In this issue of the Journal of Adolescent Health, Li et al. examined the prevalence of TWD reported by over 100,000 high school students in 36 states in the 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey [10]. Not surprisingly, TWD prevalence was greater among adolescents who also reported engaging in other risky behaviors, such as driving while intoxicated and seat belt nonuse. A finding of possibly greater interest is that TWD prevalence varied by state, ranging from 26% to 64%. TWD was highest in five relatively rural western states where the age of legal licensure was < 15 years, large percentages of high school students drove, and driving distances would be expected to be relative long. Geography would seem to be important in this regard in that TWD must be tempting on long, remote drives when enforcement of policy restrictions may be unlikely.

Average TWD prevalence of 38% as reported by Li et al. [10] among high school students is reasonably consistent with other reports of prevalence among adolescent and adults [5,7] and high enough to be considered normative behavior. Handheld phone use is legally restricted in nearly all states [11], although policies and enforcement vary and effects are largely unknown. Of course, policy restriction is but the first step. As demonstrated for safety belt use [12] and driving while intoxicated [13], routine enforcement plus education greatly increase the effect of policy on risk behavior. While enforcement serves as a deterrent, education is meant to alter the cultural norms related to the behavior.

While deterrence remains a worthy objective, the prevalence of TWD is not likely to decline any time soon, despite good policy, the threat of enforcement, and changes in cultural acceptance, given the broad diffusion of smart phones and their ubiquitous and near constant use by adolescents and adults. TWD is the sort of functional, compelling, and rewarding behavior that is difficult to change. In that TWD is born of technology, possibly technology could be harnessed for harm reduction purposes. Presently, in-vehicle technology makes the problem worse by enabling smart phone use though phone connections and bluetooth technology. Several technology-related approaches are possible. Some research has focused on blocking phone use while driving [13], which might prove to be an attractive prevention tool for some parents of novice teenage drivers, but might not be entirely acceptable to the general driving public. However, technology is available on most late model vehicles that enables smart phone dialing with voice commands that could easily be adapted for TWD (a preferred form of communication among adolescents). Should such technology become widely available as standard or after-market equipment, drivers could manage smart phone functions, including texting, maintaining eyes on the forward roadway. Hands free phone use is hardly risk free [4], but poses less risk than tasks that take drivers’

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eyes off the forward roadway and is the goal of most policy restrictions. This partial solution is not entirely satisfactory, but easily achievable, consistent with policy, and requires only a modest shift in culture from handling a smart phone to exclusive use of voice commands.

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