



Distraction-Colored Glasses:

How we report distracted driving affects how much of it we see



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Introduction

Combating distracted driving requires accurate data reflecting its prevalence, its effects on crashes, injuries and fatalities, and changes over time. Such data are crucial for allocating resources and evaluating countermeasures.

Although it is often difficult or impossible for the reporting officer to determine whether distraction was a factor in a crash, in Georgia, as in many states, the crash report is the only source available for this information.

Problem

Beginning in July 2017, Georgia law enforcement reporting agencies gradually transitioned to a new crash report form (GUMVAR 3.0) which has more options for reporting distraction as a contributing factor than the previous form (GUMVAR 2.0). This introduces a potential for bias in reporting the prevalence of distraction as a factor in crashes.

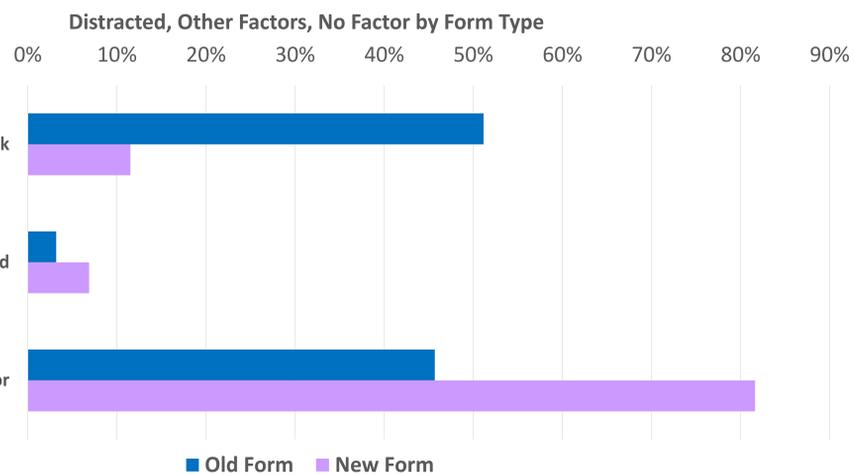
Analysis

Data: All fatal and injury crashes (injury code K, A, or B) reported via the Georgia Electronic Accident Reporting System (GEARS) in January-April 2017 (n=13,262) and January-April 2018 (n=12,382)

Variables: Month, Year, Crash Report Version, Proportion of crashes with distraction reported as a contributing factor

Results:

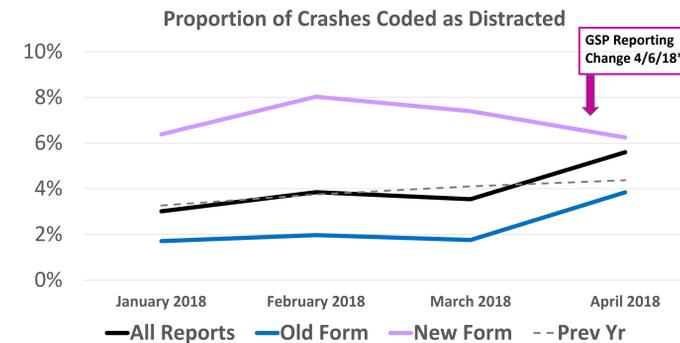
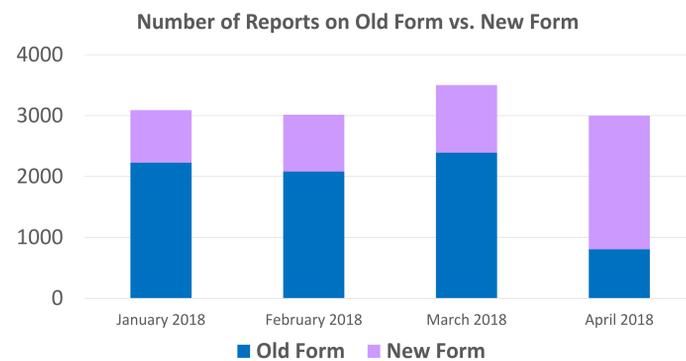
1. Distraction was reported at a higher rate on the new form than on the old form:



Percentage of fatal crashes with distraction reported as a factor (2017):
Lowest: MS, 0.73%
Highest: NM, 18.77%
US: 4.31% (FARS)

Most states have no objective measurement of distracted driving. Two states (KS and MA) include distracted driving observation in their annual seat belt surveys. (NHTSA)

2. As the new form became predominant, its higher rate of distraction exaggerated the overall rate of distraction:



*On 4/6/18, the Georgia State Patrol, which reports nearly half the crashes in the state, changed from GSP report format to the new form; prior to this date ~95% of GSP reports were coded 'no contributing factors' in the GEARS database. The rate of reported distraction in GSP reports increased from 0.15% (Jan-Mar 2018) to 4.68% (Apr 2018).

Why does it matter?

The Hands-Free Georgia Law went into effect in July 2018. The impact of the law is now being assessed as modifications are proposed. Since crash reports are currently the only source of this data, it is critical to avoid bias due to the change in report form. Results show that officers using the new form are more likely to include distraction as a contributing factor, which distorts the apparent overall trend in distracted driving during the transition period.

What's next?

Educate LEO's to consider the role of distraction in crashes and report accordingly.

Implement well-designed observational studies of distracted driving, detailed crash analysis, and other methods to more accurately assess the contribution of distraction to crashes.

Monitor how changes in reporting method affect the reported prevalence of distracted driving. Ensure that policymakers take this into account.

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