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Mass. drivers getting more tickets for texting while driving

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“As a culture, we are more and more ‘addicted’ to staying in touch at all times,” said Kara Macek.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE STAFF MAY 16, 2016

The number of motorists on Massachusetts roadways ticketed for texting while driving has steadily

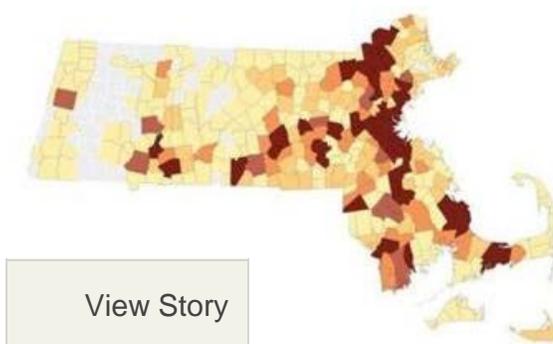
increased since the state passed legislation banning the practice six years ago, with men and people under 40 the most common violators, newly released figures show.

State and local police wrote 6,131 tickets for the offense last year, up sharply from 1,153 tickets in 2011, the first full year the ban was in place.

“As a culture, we are more and more ‘addicted’ to staying in touch at all times,” said Kara Macek, a spokeswoman for the Governors Highway Safety Association.

The habit has had a devastating effect: Nationally, distraction-related crashes killed 3,179 people and injured an estimated 431,000 in 2014, the most recent year for which data was available, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

The Globe reviewed data from the state Transportation Department on 18,383 tickets issued for texting while driving from the year the practice became illegal in 2010 to mid-April of this year. Findings from the data included:



Graphics on citations issued for texting while driving in Mass.

State and local police wrote 6,131 tickets for the offense last year.

Texting while driving ticket tallies by Mass. city, town

- People 40 and younger received more than three-quarters of the tickets.
- 56.4 percent of tickets went to men.
- The most common time of day to be ticketed was between 4 and 6 p.m.
- April — which is Distracted Driving Awareness Month — was the most common month for ticketing.
- No citations were issued in a few dozen small communities.



Specialists say the trends are likely driven by a variety of factors, including the behavior of drivers and the practices of police officers who pull them over.

“Law enforcement are developing better tools and techniques to detect texting drivers, although it is still a big challenge,” Macek said.

Younger drivers — most likely to text or use social media — are particularly tempted by texting. Drivers in their 20s represent 23 percent of drivers in all fatal crashes but account for 38 percent of the drivers who were found to be using cellphones in fatal crashes, Macek said.

“Texting is often the top form of communication for those in their teens and twenties,” said Mary Maguire, a spokeswoman for the American Automobile Association.

Created with Highcharts 4.0.4 **Texting while driving tickets in Massachusetts, by year**
274115317343399472061319722010 (illegalas of Sept.30)201120122013201420152016 (as ofmid-April)

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‘Law enforcement are developing better tools and techniques to detect texting drivers, although it is still a big challenge.’

Kara Macek, Governors Highway Safety Association

People in that age group are also “heavy users of social media,” she said. That means they could be looking at photos, typing, reading, or even taking selfies as they drive.

Professor David Strayer, who heads a research center on distracted driving at the University of Utah, said that as younger, cellphone-savvy people get older, and as mobile device use proliferates, texting is becoming more common among older drivers.

“We’re starting to see it migrate to the older generations,” he said.

For now, tickets for older people remain relatively rare. Police wrote tickets only 120 times to drivers 65 or older. (Those ticketed included an 88-year-old man who was cited by officers in Westwood last year.)

The Massachusetts data that show that men have been ticketed for texting while driving more often than women, in some ways, counters what researchers have found nationally.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in [annual observation surveys](#) has consistently found female drivers texting behind the wheel more often than males.

It might be that men wind up with more tickets overall because they tend to drive more miles per year than women, specialists say.

National studies have also found “that men generally engage in riskier behavior when behind the wheel,” Maguire said.

“Compared with women, men have a higher incidence of severe crashes, speeding tickets, and driving under the influence,” she said.

Data from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety indicates that about twice as many men are killed in crashes each year, compared with women.

But a [Globe review of traffic tickets issued statewide in 2003](#) found women were far more likely to receive written warnings instead of tickets when stopped for identical traffic offenses as men.

The race and ethnicity of drivers cited since 2010 for texting nearly mirrored the racial and ethnic breakdown of the state’s population, according to the new state data.

The most common time of day for drivers to be cited for texting while driving was during the evening rush hour — between 4 and 6 p.m. The next most common time was during the morning commute to work.

“There are more cars on the road during rush hour. And when drivers are sitting in traffic, there’s a potent temptation to pull out the cellphone to pass the time,” Maguire said. “Drivers may feel pressured to check in with home, office, day care, or kids in need of pickup from sports or other after-school activities during the 4 and 5 o’clock hours.”

In April of this year, State Police alone issued more than 2,200 tickets, apparently as a result of stepped up enforcement of Distracted Driving Awareness Month.

“April is when Massachusetts has, for the last couple of years, conducted a Distracted Driving enforcement mobilization with state and local police,” said Jeff Larason, the state’s director of highway safety.

He said that while not every city and town across Massachusetts has participated, many — about 140 to 150 — have, causing a spike in ticketing during that month.

The State Police ticketing spree [last month](#) will certainly cause a surge in the 2016 numbers.

While enforcement has gone up overall, it is not uniform across the state. Over the six-year period, no tickets were handed out by local or State Police in 40 Massachusetts communities, mostly smaller ones in the western part of the state.

Texting while driving was outlawed in Massachusetts on Sept. 30, 2010, after concerns were raised about fatal crashes involving people who were distracted by mobile devices while behind the wheel.

In Massachusetts, from 2010 to 2013, 184 people died in crashes that were caused by distracted driving, state officials have said.

[The Massachusetts law](#) banning texting while driving prohibits the use of “a mobile telephone, or any handheld device capable of accessing the internet, to manually compose, send or read an electronic message while operating a motor vehicle,” on any part of “a public way intended for travel,” regardless of whether the vehicle is moving.

The tickets come with a fine of \$100 for a first offense, \$250 for a second offense, and \$500 for a third or subsequent offense.

Drivers under 18 are banned from using a cellphone at all while at the wheel, and if caught in violation of the rule can have their license suspended in addition to fines.

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