Partners in Prevention

Missouri's higher education substance misuse prevention consortium

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# Distracted Driving Amongst Missouri College Students

**Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to building and sustaining healthy and safe college campuses.** The coalition is comprised of 28 public and private colleges and universities in the state. The campuses in PIP work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies, including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. The survey assesses the roles that alcohol, cannabis, other drugs (illegal and prescription), tobacco/nicotine, interpersonal violence, and mental health concerns have on student health and well-being. This brief includes data for the twenty-one 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey. This brief will explore the driving practices of Missouri college students.

**The following are findings from the MACHB survey (N=4,759) of 4-year member institutions in Missouri from Spring 2026:**

## Introduction

The National Highway and Traffic Safety Association defines distracted driving as any activity that diverts attention from driving safely. However, with the new Siddens Bening Hands Free Law, which bans individuals from using phones in any way while driving on public roads, there has been a focus on phone distraction while driving in Missouri. Accidents that are caused by cell phone use are one of the fastest growing types of accidents in Missouri, and they continue to increase every year. It is estimated that nearly 9 out of 10 people engage in phone use at some level while driving[1]. It is also estimated that distracted driving is responsible for 8% of traffic fatalities, with over 3,500 lives lost in one year from these accidents alone. Data presented by the CDC shows that drivers, especially students, who text and drive are also more likely to not wear a seatbelt, drive after drinking alcohol, and ride with a driver who had been drinking alcohol. Despite mixed perceptions, numerous high-risk behaviors are associated with distracted driving and often lead to higher crash risks[2] .

## National Data & Background

Drivers aged 15-34 have the highest rates of distracted driving tendencies of all ages. This makes transitional youth and college-aged individuals the most distracted drivers on our roadways. Drivers aged 15-20 made up 8% of drivers in fatal accidents, 11% of all distracted drivers, and 16% of drivers distracted by phones in fatal accidents. This age group also has the largest proportion of drivers within all age groups who were distracted. Drivers in the 21-24 age group made up 9% of drivers in fatal accidents, 11% of all distracted drivers, and 15% of drivers distracted by cell phones in fatal accidents. Lastly, the 25-34 age group is made up of 22% of drivers in fatal accidents, 25% of all distracted drivers, and 30% of drivers distracted by cells phones in fatal accidents[3].

Missouri is one of two states that prior to 2023 did not have a 'no texting and driving' law for all drivers, and one of nine without a hands-free law. 12 out of 15 states studied saw a decrease in fatality rates within two years of implementing a hands-free law on their



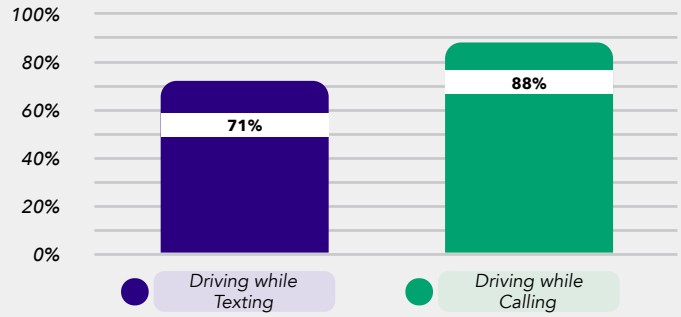
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roadways. Of the 15 states mentioned, there was an average of a 15.3% decrease in fatality rates, and six of those states saw a decrease of more than 20% in fatality rates[4]. In August of 2023, the Siddens Bening Hands Free Law took effect in the state of Missouri as a secondary offense, and in January of 2025, it became a primary offense. This means anyone physically holding or supporting an electronic device, manually writing texts or e-mails, or making any engaging actions with an electronic device can be pulled over and fined, or charged with a traffic offense.

## 2026 MACHB Data

The MACHB asks students to report on their driving behaviors. Over the years, distracted driving rates among Missouri college students have remained relatively the same. In 2024, 87% of Missouri college students reported talking on their cell phone at some point while driving, and in 2025, the number rose to 88% (MACHB, 2024-2025). In 2024, 70% of respondents said they had texted on their phone while driving at some point, and the number rose to 72% in 2025 (MACHB 2024-2025). In 2026, 65% of respondents reported that they drive a car while attending classes at their university. **Chart 1** shows the rates that these students report calling or texting on their phone while driving in 2026.

**Chart 1.** Distracted Driving Behaviors




According to the CDC, distracted drivers also tend to commit other unsafe driving behaviors. **Chart 2** shows the rate of students that report calling and texting while driving, while also (1) driving after drinking within the prior 2-hours, and (2) driving after smoking cannabis. PIP research coordinators combined the population of those that report texting and calling while driving, and cross-tabbed the population with those that report driving within 2-hours after drinking and after smoking cannabis. This data provides evidence to support that drivers who use their phone while driving also participate in other risky driving behaviors such as drinking or smoking cannabis while driving.

**Chart 2.** Distracted Driving Behaviors
(among those who endorse texting and/or calling while driving)

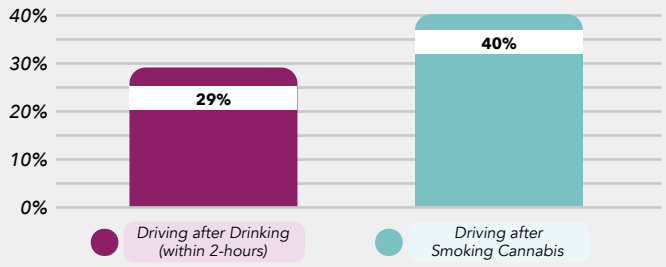
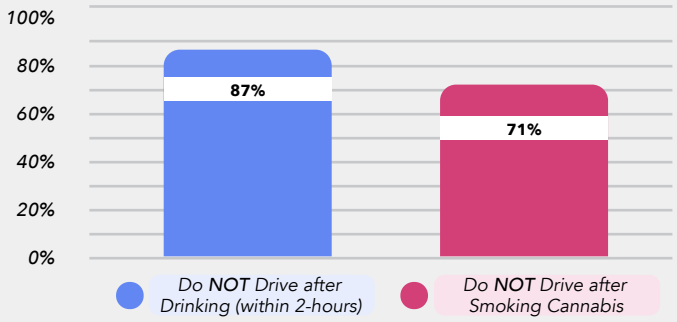



**Chart 3** shows those students who **do not use** their phone while driving and also **don't drive impaired** from alcohol or cannabis. Data was calculated by taking the populations of students who self-reported not texting and calling while driving and cross-tabbed that with the students who self-reported not driving within two-hours of drinking as well as those who self-reported not driving after smoking cannabis.

This data is another example of how those students who practice safe driving behavior related to phone use, also practice safe driving behaviors related to impairment. This further shows the importance of messaging and programming around safe driving habits on higher education campuses.

**Chart 3.** Distracted Driving Behaviors
(among those who do **NOT** use their phone while driving)





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## Moving Forward

While distracted driving rates have stayed steady, new distracted driving laws are being enforced and may lead to some reduction in distracted driving. Many people do not realize that using their phone while driving is now a primary offense and something they can be fined for if found to be out of compliance. Not only is distracted driving an expensive traffic offense, it is very dangerous for both the driver and other road users. Distracted driving often takes a 'back-seat' in driving programming but should be viewed just as importantly as other traffic safety issues such as impaired or drowsy driving. Cell phone related crashes are one of the fastest growing causes of traffic crashes in Missouri and are only increasing in rate each year (Missouri Coalition for Roadway Safety, 2025). Research continues to show a correlation between distracted drivers and impaired drivers, which is a critical issue that affects more than just Missouri campuses, but also the communities in which they operate. Addressing distracted driving should be an initiative on all Missouri higher education campuses to keep students and other citizens safe.

## Prevention Initiatives

Institutions of higher education in Missouri have worked to prevent impaired driving using statewide initiatives funded by the Missouri Department of Transportation delivered through Partners in Prevention.

DRIVE SAFE
DRIVE Hands-free

click logo for more information.

Drive Safe Drive Hands Free (DSDHF) is an educational program working to promote safe driving behaviors, reduce distracted driving rates among Missouri college students, and educate Missourians about the Siddens Bening law. Drive Safe Drive Hands Free provides resources and materials to campuses including paper resources, social media programming, and more to assist in messaging and education.

DRIVE SAFE
DRIVE SMART

Drive Safe Drive Smart (DSDS) is an educational program working to promote safe driving behaviors and reduce impaired driving among college students in Missouri. Drive Safe Drive Smart provides resources and materials to campuses including brochures and handouts, social media, and more to assist in messaging and education. DSDS also assists in the placement of educational billboards throughout the state.

The Missouri Coalition for Roadway Safety has a lot of great data, and information about statewide campaigns related to distracted driving across the state. The site also has many downloadable resources such as infographics, hands outs, and videos. For additional information please visit https://www.savemolives.com/mcrs/distracted-driving

Missouri Coalition for Roadway Safety

Together with the Montana Collegiate Traffic Safety Group, NASPA (Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education) created and released the Collegiate Traffic Safety Toolkit. The toolkit presents traffic data, health promotion models and strategies, and compliance information to assist stakeholders in addressing traffic safety behaviors in their communities. Find the toolkit at 2021_CollegiateTrafficSafety_Toolkit_R2.pdf.

HCM Healthy Colleges Montana
NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

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Endnotes
1 Distracted Driving | Missouri Department of Transportation - https://www.savemolives.com/mcrs/distracted-driving
2 Distracted Driving Risk Factors | Distracted Driving | CDC - https://www.cdc.gov/distracted-driving/risk-factors/index.html
3 Distracted Driving Risk Factors | Distracted Driving | CDC - https://www.cdc.gov/distracted-driving/risk-factors/index.html
4 Minnesota Safety Council | Reduction in Fatalities White Paper| https://www.house.mn.gov/comm/docs/4e97fdeb-6241-4222-ab9f-c67fe92df79a.pdf

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