

Distracted Driving

Exploring Teen's Unsafe Driving Habits in Los Alamos

By the Los Alamos Youth Mobilizers:

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State Farm



Introduction

Los Alamos High School is filled with busy students, schedules filled with academics, athletics, and extra-curriculars. Such students, one would imagine, would be prudent enough to drive safely. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. With their busy schedules, students often engage in distracted driving. Distracted driving is, as the name might suggest, driving while being distracted by anything, whether it is a cell phone, a friend, or while intoxicated.

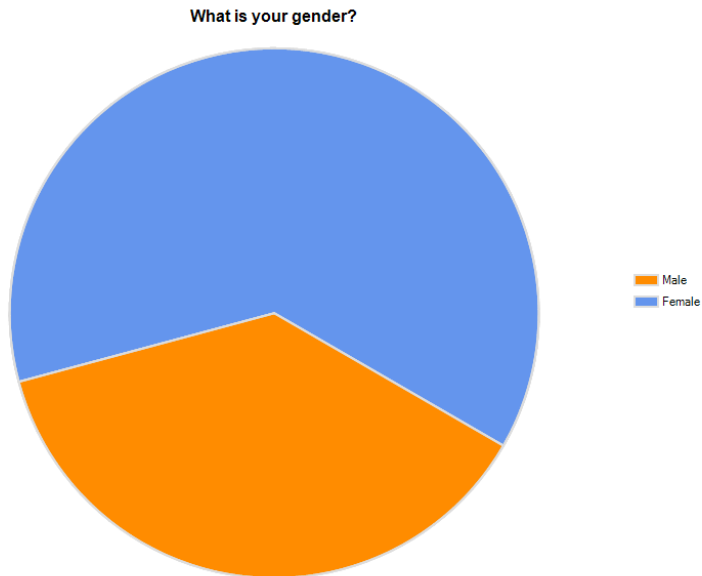
This survey was originally inspired by Distracted Driving Week, which is October 18th to 22nd. We all have, at some point in our lives, been in a car with a distracted driver. Some of us have even been the distracted driver. We, the Youth Mobilizers, wanted to see how often teens actually do drive while distracted. We also wanted to spread the word about the dangers of distracted driving, and encourage our peers to not drive with distractions. We wanted to do what we could to stop this trend by understanding how teens in Los Alamos feel about distracted driving, and what we could do to help.

Background

We, the Youth Mobilizers of Los Alamos, are composed of Anna Pabian (16), Katarina Juarez (17), and Myles Gurule (15). Anna Pabian is the junior class president, KJ Juarez is the student body president, and Myles Gurule is the vice president of the LAHS Speech and Debate team. The three of us work together in taking what we see as issues in the community and working to improve them through research and action projects. Youth Mobilizers, a national program, opened a chapter in Los Alamos in 2008. The Youth Mobilizers are funded by the Juvenile Justice Advisory Board and are administered by the Los Alamos YMCA.

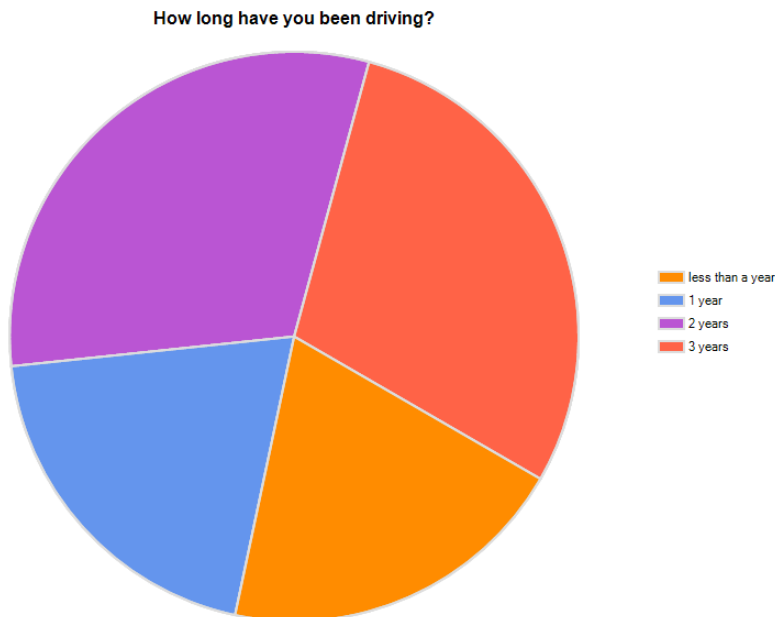
Results

What is your gender?



There were more females than males, which may impact our findings slightly, as studies have shown that teen females tend to be better, less aggressive drivers. Oftentimes, males tend to take more risks (like driving distractedly), so our results may be skewed slightly.

How long have you been driving?



All respondents were in high school, so none had been driving for more than three years. Our responses were pretty evenly divided between the various options of less than a year, one year, two years, and three years. However, there were slightly more responses for two and three years, suggesting that the majority of respondents were upperclassmen.

3. Please list 3 different examples of distracted driving.

Every respondent was able to list at least 3 examples, with many listing more. Responses included texting, using an iPod, talking to friends, being drunk, being high, taking pictures, and eating.

4. Do you know if there are any laws against distracted driving in New Mexico? If so what are they?

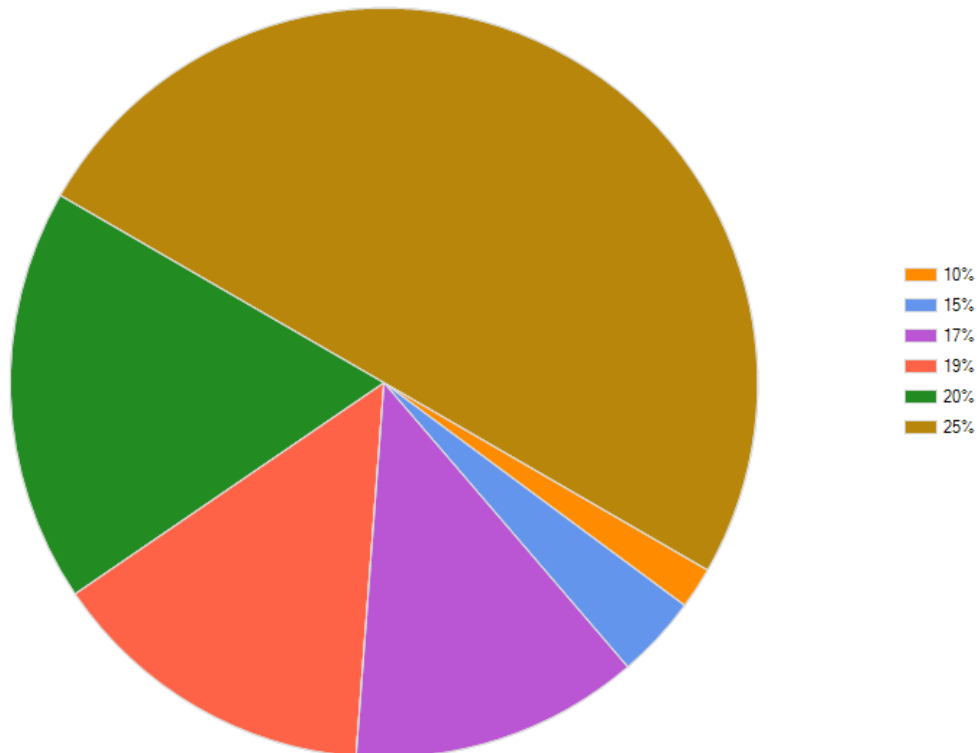
The vast majority of respondents listed laws against texting or using a cell phone in various municipalities and counties in New Mexico, as well as drinking-and-driving laws.

5. Do you think distracted driving is a big deal? Why or why not?

Most respondents showed understanding of the risks of distracted driving. Most responses were variants of ‘yes, because you can get in an accident or kill someone’.

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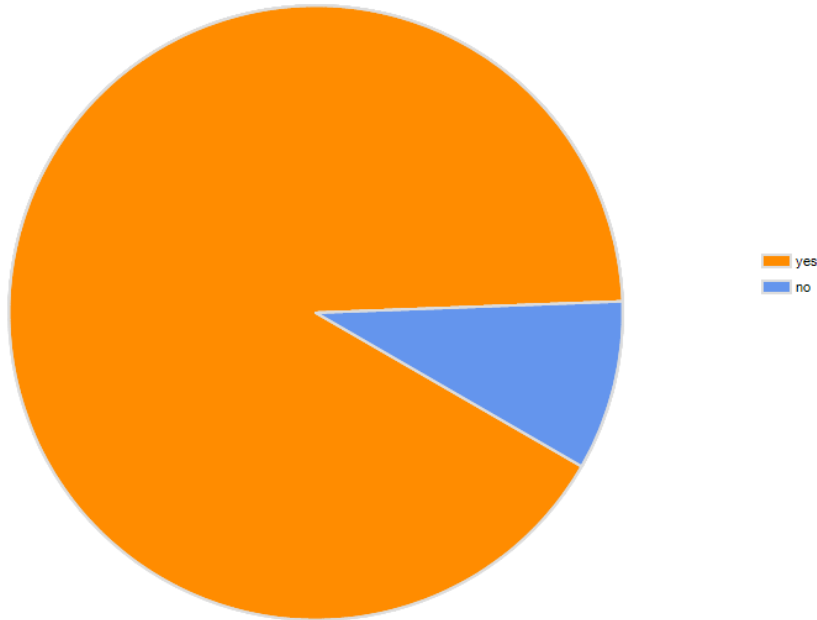


There were an increasing amount of responses for higher percentages of accidents. The correct answer is about 17%, but only 1/8th of respondents guessed this. This indicates that teens are

very aware of the risks of distracted driving, to the point that they actually believe that distracted driving is more of a risk than it actually is.

7. Do you think using your cell phone while you drive affects your ability to drive safely?

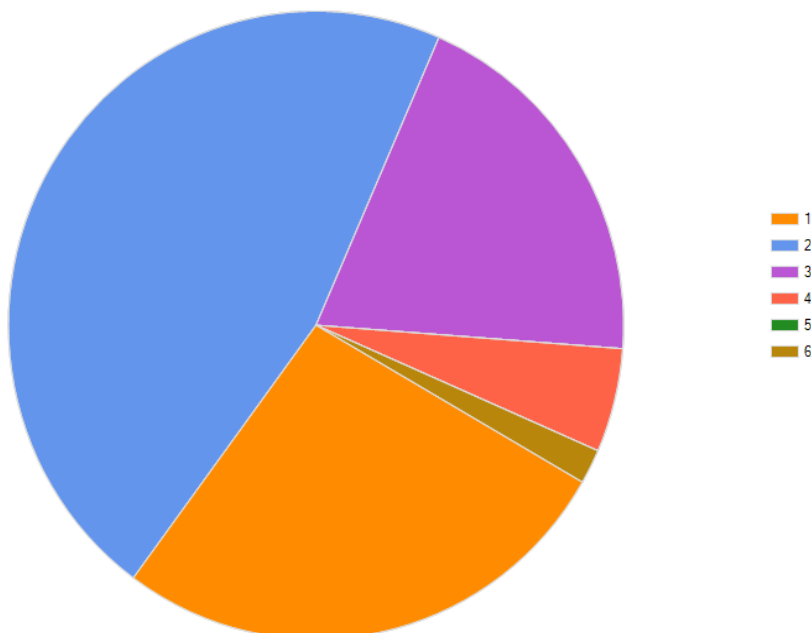
Do you think using your cell phone while you drive affects your ability to drive safely?



As the graph clearly indicates, the vast majority of respondents did believe that using a cell phone while driving was a significant distraction. Only 5 out of 56 respondents did not think so.

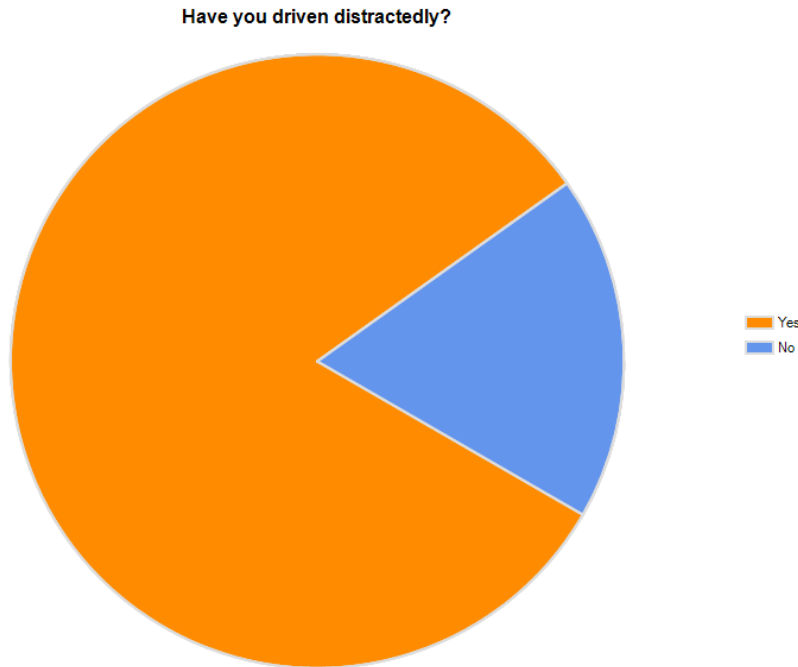
8. The legal blood alcohol content in New Mexico is .08%. How many drinks do you think that is on average?

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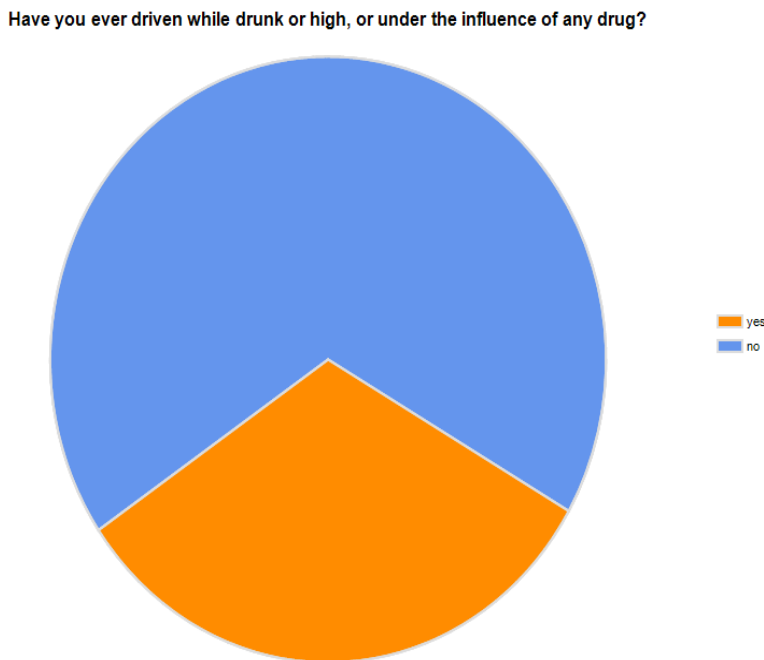
The majority of respondents said 'two', with one or three shortly behind. All of these could be accurate, depending on one's body weight and other factors, but two is the most common number.

9. Have you driven distractedly?



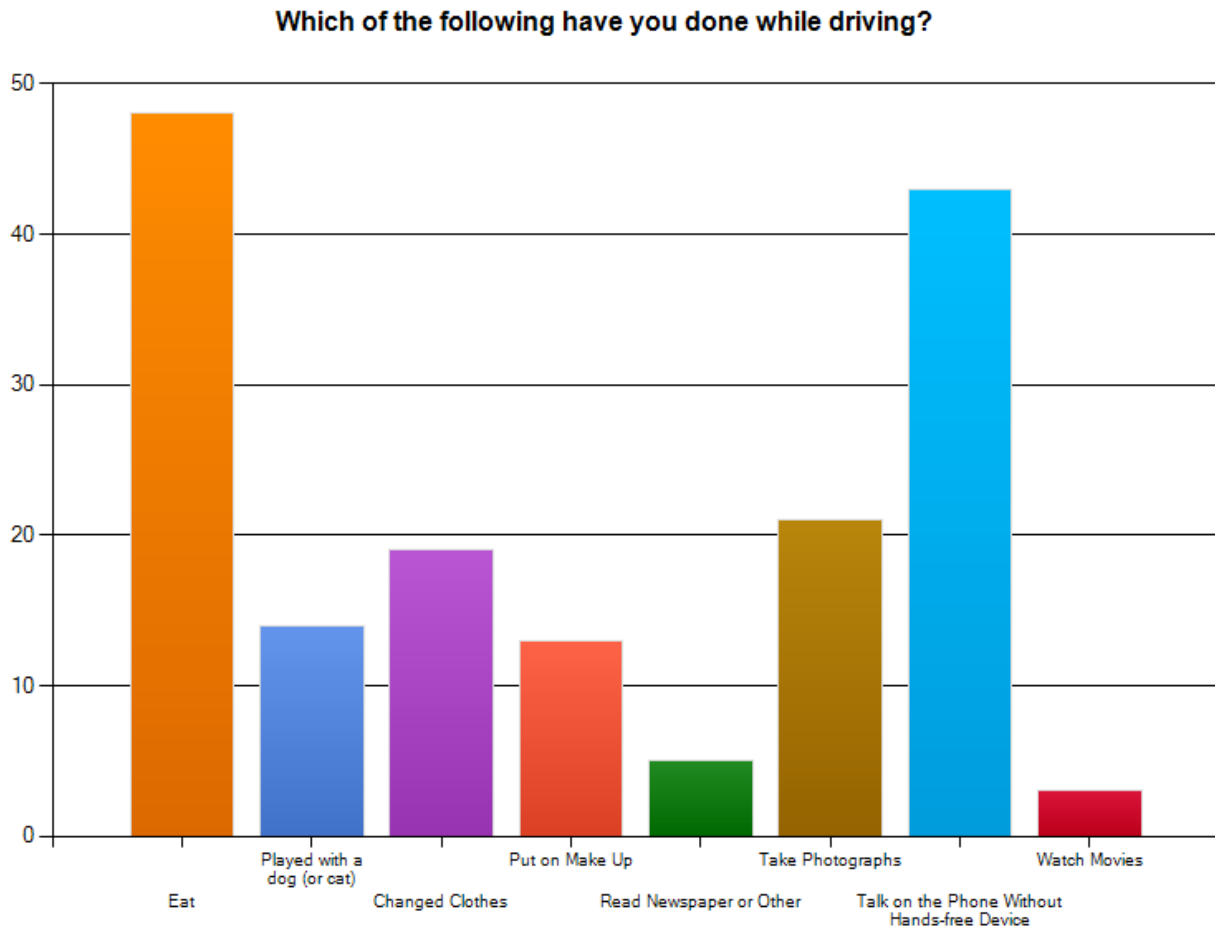
As the graph indicates, the majority of respondents had, in fact, driven distractedly. However, almost 20% of respondents reported that they had never driven distractedly. We feel like this is unlikely, which could mean that teens have a limited understanding of all of the distractions they face, or that they have an ‘it couldn’t happen to me’ mentality.

10. Have you ever driven while drunk or high, or under the influence of any drug?



The majority of respondents said that they had never driven drunk or under the influence of a drug. This is probably because the majority of respondents had never used drugs or alcohol. If they had, they probably would have lied about such a personal topic, because the survey was informal and taken over the Internet. Other kids might merely understand the dangers of driving under the influence and choose not to do so.

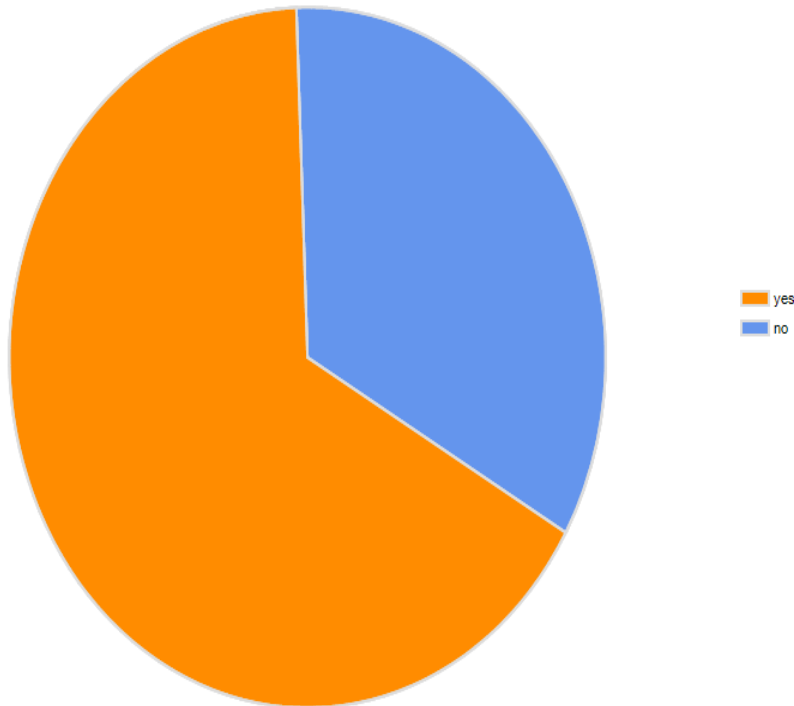
11. Which of the following have you done while driving?



The most common responses were drivers having eaten, talked on the phone, and taken photos. Other, less common responses were played with an animal, changed clothes, read a newspaper, magazine, or book, put on make-up, or watched a movie.

12. Do you allow your friends to text or drive distractedly when you are in the car with them?

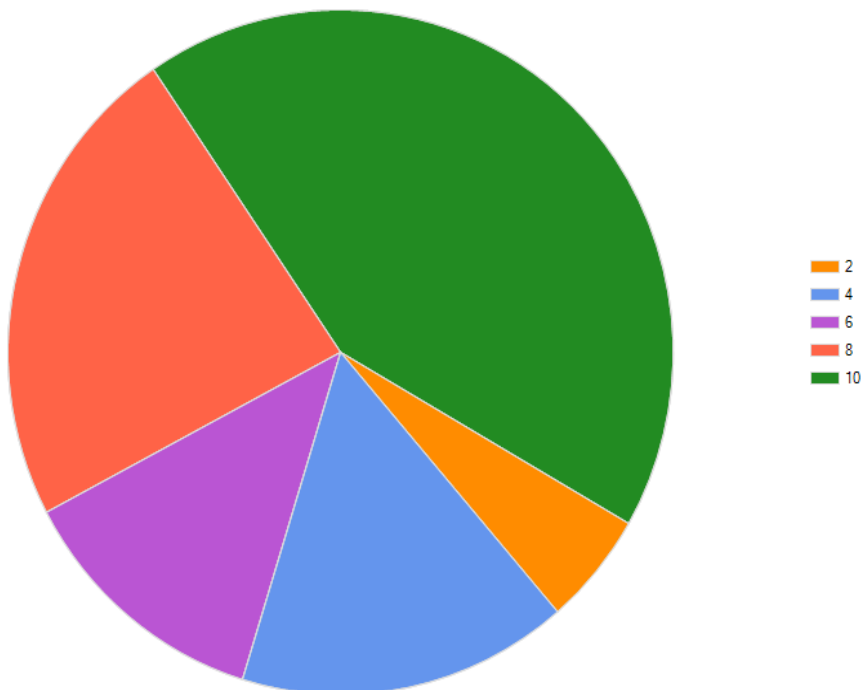
Do you allow your friends to text or drive distractedly when you are in the car with them?



Most people said that they usually allow their friends to drive distractedly. This probably stems from an ‘it can’t happen to me’ mentality whereby teens subject themselves to distracted driving while having full knowledge and understanding of the consequences. Also, most teens would not feel comfortable telling their friends what to do.

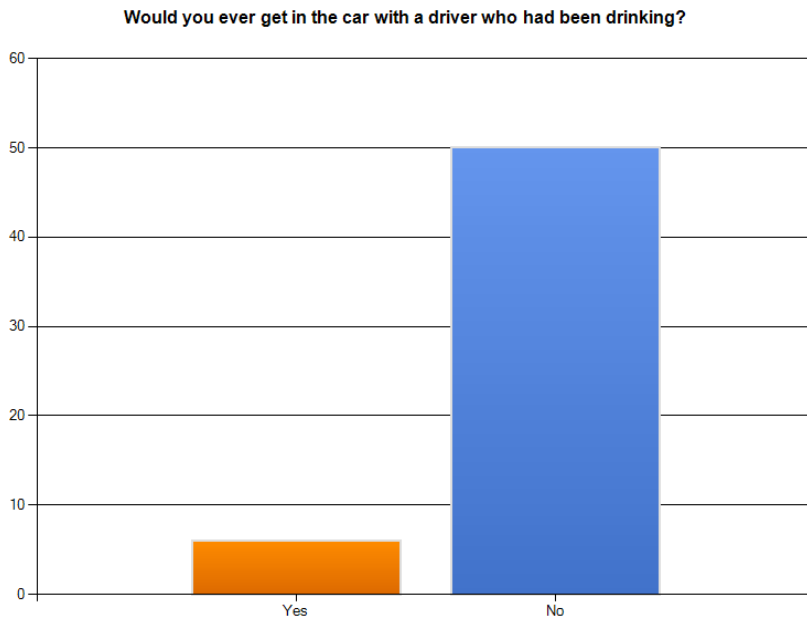
13. How many teens do you think die every day from drunk driving?

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The majority of respondents said that 10 teens die every day from drunk driving. Actually, it’s closer to 8, but most people were still very close. This also shows that the public is aware of the dangers of drunk driving.

14. Would you ever get in the car with a driver who had been drinking?



The majority of respondents said that they would not get in a car with a drunk driver. This is a good sign, as it shows that even if teens have a 'it couldn't happen to me' mentality, or don't care about the risks of some distracted driving, they seem to put their foot down when it comes to drunk driving. However, this means that teenagers need to be educated about the risks of all types of distracted driving, not just drunk driving.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal a lot about teens' attitudes toward distracted driving. Most teenagers understand the risks and dangers of distracted driving. However, they choose to drive distractedly anyway. This is probably because they have a combination of various attitudes. First, teens often feel like they are invincible and do not have a sense of their mortality. Second, teenagers sometimes are aware of the risks of distracted driving, but they feel like it can't happen to them. This is different than the first because the teen understands his or her mortality, but bases their choices on the statistically legitimate idea that an accident will probably not happen to them. Third, teenagers are aware of the risks, but they continue to engage in distracting behavior for the sake of convenience.

These understandings of teen viewpoints give insight in how to diminish the incidence of distracted driving. The first attitude is the feeling of invincibility. This can be changed by demonstrating to youth the dangers of distracted driving and showing what can happen as result of this dangerous activity. The second attitude is an understanding of their mortality, but betting that an accident will not happen to them. Thus, we can change the attitude of teens by stressing the dangers of driving distractedly, and showing that every act of distracted driving increases one's risk of an accident. Unfortunately, we cannot do much to change the third attitude, except perhaps encouraging teenagers to talk with their parents about picking them up late at night.

Overall, we hope that the information that we have provided will help strengthen community efforts to minimize distracted driving. In fact, we will be using our findings to provide a one-day program at the high school in order to prevent driving while intoxicated. The event will take place at Pueblo

Complex on the first Saturday of December will involve fun activities with no alcohol in order to encourage teenagers to have fun safely. We also hope to present the information in this survey to community leaders in order to adopt more effective anti-distracted-driving programs in the community. Our goal is to maximize efforts that counter the unsafe habit of distracted driving.

Recognition

We, the Youth Mobilizers, would like to recognize Chief Torpy and Sue Hoffman for their support and for providing us with information. We couldn't have done it without them.