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CRASH TEXT DUMMIES

Drivers may be missing warning signs about
dangers of messaging **pages 6-7**

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DANGER: TEXTS AHEAD

STATEWIDE BAN AIMS TO KEEP HANDS ON WHEEL, EYES ON ROAD

By **Leonor Vivanco**
REDEYE

After riding shotgun with her text-happy former roommate, Jinny Yi couldn't take it anymore.

"She would be texting while driving with her knees," said Yi, 31, who lives on the Gold Coast. "It was really scary."

Yi eventually stopped accepting rides from her friend and started offering to drive.

"Texting is probably one of the worst things to do while driving because it's so distracting," she said.

It's not just distracting. Starting Jan. 1, texting while driving will be illegal in Illinois. The state will join 18 other states, including California and New York, that have texting bans. In late September, President Obama signed an executive order banning federal workers from texting while driving on the job or in government-owned vehicles.

Texting drivers are 23 times more likely to get into a crash than drivers who were not distracted, according to a Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study released in July. That's more of a risk than dialing or talking on a cell phone. Drivers texting had their eyes off the road for 4.6 seconds, equal to the time it would take to drive down a football field at 55 mph, the study showed.

Despite these and other studies that show the dangers of texting while driving—a test by Car and Driver Magazine found texting was worse than drunk driving when it came to drivers' response times—the behavior ranked surprisingly low in a recent poll about distracting car behaviors.

In a LeaseTrader.com survey of more than 3,000 drivers released last month, men ranked road rage frustration, eating and drinking and checking out other drivers more dangerous than texting while driving. Women listed kids in the car, putting on makeup and messing with the radio as the top dangers.

"That's weird. I think texting is way more

THE OTHER PHONE OFFENSE

In addition to the upcoming statewide texting ban, Chicago has had a law on the books since July 2005 to ticket drivers on cell phones not using a hands-free device.

But this year, the number of tickets issued for using cell phones while driving is down drastically compared to the past few years. From January to Oct. 30 this year, 2,403 tickets were written. That's down from the 7,584 tickets in all of 2008, 17,413 in 2007, and 13,433 in 2006, according to statistics compiled by the traffic division of the Cook County circuit court and provided by the Chicago Police Department.

dangerous," said Caroline O'Hare, 24, who lives in Old Town. "You're not looking at the road, you're looking at your phone."

Meanwhile, the use of texting continues to skyrocket. More than 740 billion texts were reportedly sent in the first half of 2009, nearly double compared to last year, according to CTIA, an association that represents the wireless telecommunications industry.

Drivers don't need hew technology to be distracted, said John Sternal, spokesman for LeaseTrader.com, an online marketplace for car lease transfers. Sternal said he's seen drivers use electric razors in the car and knows drivers look at other drivers.

"Let's face it, I'm guilty of this too," Sternal said. "I'm a guy; guys like to look. You take your eyes off the road to send a text message and see who the pretty girl is—the bottom line is, your eyes are off the road."

Driver distraction was reported to be involved in 16 percent of fatal crashes and 21 percent of injury crashes in 2008, according to statistics released in September by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The under-20 age group had the greatest proportion



of distracted drivers involved in fatal crashes followed by drivers between the ages of 20 to 29, NHTSA stats showed. Specific distractions were not broken out.

"Texting right now is perhaps the most egregious act of distracted driving that involves technology that is occurring on our roads today," said Henry Haupt, spokesman for the Illinois Secretary of State's office. "When an individual has their hands off the steering wheel, their eyes are off the road and they're busy composing a message, the question is,

"Who's driving the car?"

Despite the number of studies that show the dangers, despite the growing bans, texting is just too tempting for drivers like Paul Lesclieux, who says he can't resist checking messages.

The 18-year-old Hinsdale student said he's aware he gets distracted from driving when he reads and responds to texts in the car, but, "It saves time and sometimes you need to give an immediate answer."

"I know it's bad," he said. "There's no real excuse to do it." LVIVANCO@TRIBUNE.COM



BY THE NUMBERS

A survey by AAA of 2,501 people ages 16 and older released in July showed:

- 35%** Report driving feels less safe today than five years ago
- 31%** Cite distracted driving as the reason
- 21%** Admit to texting while driving
- 90%** Rate people driving after drinking alcohol as a serious threat to their safety
- 87%** Rate drivers text messaging or e-mailing as a very serious threat
- 95%** Say texting while driving is completely or somewhat unacceptable

DISTRACTED DRIVERS

In a survey of more than 3,000 drivers released last month, LeaseTrader.com asked drivers to list the top three most dangerous driving distractions. Here's a look at the participants' answers.

