

In the Line of Duty: Distracted Driving



By Michael Robbs, Branch Chief,
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Awakening from a self-induced state of “driver’s hypnosis,” I am suddenly aware I am driving through the intersection of McCallie Avenue and South Holtzclaw. Wow, I just drove three miles and really don’t remember anything about it! How many cars did I pass along the way; did I stop when I needed to stop; yield when I needed to yield; and did I miss any significant radio traffic from dispatch? We tell our students to “leave their personal concerns at home, our jobs are dangerous, complacency kills, we must be sharp and vigilant.” Of course, in reality, we are also human.

In recent years, the deadly consequences of distracted driving in the United States has received much attention and public awareness resulting in most states establishing laws governing the use of cell phones while operating a motor vehicle. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines “distracted driving” as “any activity that could divert a person’s attention away from the primary task of driving.” This definition fits all drivers to include law enforcement.

Significant examples of the impact of distracted driving in the United States include:

- In 2009 - 5,474 people were killed involving driver distraction and 448,000 were injured. This equates to 16 percent of fatal crashes and 20 percent of injury crashes.

- A driver has a 23 times greater risk of having a crash when they text.
- Driving while using the cell phone reduces the amount of brain activity (which should be used for driving) by 37 percent.
- In the month of June 2011, more than 196 billion text messages were sent or received in the U.S., up nearly 50 percent from June 2009.
- During any given hour of the day - 800,000 vehicles are being driven by someone using a hand-held cell phone.
- Sending and receiving a text message results in the driver taking their eyes off the road on average 4.6 seconds (at 55 mph – this is equivalent to the length of a football field). According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 10 states have banned hand-held use of cell phones and 35 states have banned texting outright.

So, how is distracted driving different for law enforcement (LE)? Today's LE driver is tasked with numerous responsibilities which far exceed those of normal vehicle operators. We tell the civilian drivers to stay focused on their driving and not let themselves be distracted by personal issues, technological distractions and/or conversation with passengers. Conversely, we in law enforcement are faced with a dilemma. The very nature of our job puts the job tasks for driving on duty at a level well beyond that of any other motor vehicle operator.

When an officer or agent is required to run Code-3 (blue lights and siren) to a call such as a traffic accident with injuries or to assist an agent calling for help when serving an arrest warrant, a much greater level of required tasks is necessary. For such incidents the officer/agent is now responding to the scene of an incident in which they are required to expedite their response. During such times, their emotions, operational planning and distraction levels become factors in which they must contend. Other examples include responding to a burglary in progress, conducting a rolling surveillance or responding to a silent hold-up alarm. Such duties now require the officer/agent to communicate with other responders or team members and begin tactically planning their approach or routes via radio—all while expediting to the scene and exercising due-regard for other traffic and pedestrians using the roadway. LE driving tasks become even more complicated when you consider vehicle pursuits or responding to an officer-in-trouble call. At these levels of procedural responsibilities, the law enforcement officer or agent experiences the full force of visual, manual and cognitive tasks which can affect the safe and effective operations of a motor vehicle during the performance of their duty. Law Enforcement Driving is NOT Normal Driving!

Driving is commonly divided into three areas of taskings to include visual, manual and cognitive. Using these categories the following are samples of distractions which have been identified as being required of a LE motor vehicle operator:

Visual Distraction

LE officers and agents not only are required to safely negotiate thru traffic, obeying and observing traffic codes and regulations like that of any driver; but at the same time we must be on the top of our situational awareness game and are expected to identify: a visual summons from a citizen flagging you down for assistance, suspicious behavior of other drivers and pedestrians along the roadway, criminal activity, crimes in progress, traffic violations, expired vehicle tags, conduct static and rolling vehicle surveillance and to operate a vehicle during all weather and environmental conditions.

Manual Distractions

The modern LE vehicle is most often equipped with additional technological devices to include police radio, blue lights and siren, take-down and alley lights, video cameras, radar, license plate reader, mobile data terminal (MDT), global positioning system (GPS), flashlight and radio chargers and a long-gun mounting device. Additionally, we may be required to operate a variety of vehicle types to include sedan, high center of gravity vehicle (SUV), pick-up trucks, armored vehicle, etc.

Cognitive Distractions

The LE vehicle operator is not only required to recognize and execute cognitive driving decisions as we safely negotiate thru traffic, obeying and observing traffic codes and regulations like that of any driver, but at the same time we are presented with greater levels of cognitive tasks as the result of the LE responsibilities which include recognizing and responding to dispatched Be On Look Out (BOLO's), recognizing and responding to dispatched calls, keeping up with the assignments of other officers or agents on duty so that you are able to respond to their location for assistance if needed, route planning to dispatched calls, tactical planning for the various types of calls you are responding to tactical planning with other officers or agents responding to the same call, exercise regard for other traffic/pedestrians when expediting to a call, emergency response (Code 3), emergency response (Non-Code 3), pursuit driving, and they must continually evaluate the legal justifications for their driving and tactics. IN THE LINE OF DUTY: DISTRACTED DRIVING

And then there are the consequences of stress and emotions: FEAR-ANGER-ADRENALINE.

“Red Mist” is a term that has been used to describe the state of mind of drivers who are so determined to achieve some objective – catching the vehicle in front, getting to an accident in the shortest possible time – that they are no longer capable of realistically assessing driving risks. Their minds are not on driving but on some other goal: they have become emotionally and physiologically caught up in the incident. Another term sometimes used is ‘target fixation.’

Over the past 15 years, various government organizations and research universities have helped to document and bring to light the sobering statistics of LE-involved crashes. Line-of-duty deaths are the result of vehicle-related incidents more than any other cause. With this knowledge, various agencies have begun to research ways to reduce law enforcement crashes through a variety of means to include awareness campaigns such as the “Below 100” initiative, the use of driving simulators for helping to teach judgment and decision making, and more restrictive Code 3 emergency response and pursuit policies.

So what can trainers and agencies do in order to better prepare our officers and agents to be safe and effective drivers?

The following is a list of measures which are being taken by many LE agencies and training centers to help reduce police-involved crashes:

- Considering LE driver distractions - Review your agency’s Emergency Response and Pursuit policies – update if needed. Establish a policy of compliance and enforcement at all levels.
- Research your agency’s crash records for lessons learned.
- Review your driver training curriculum for needed changes. Often LE driver/cultural attitudes are established at this level – both good and bad! Consider yearly driver-training re-qualifications, such as is done with firearms.
- Consider training the Field Training Officers (FTOs) in order to have them reinforce the sound driving skills and attitudes taught in the academy.
- Balance your driving curriculum with judgment and decision making along with the skills of safe expeditious driving.
- Provide stress management training.
- Launch an awareness campaign – “Below 100” is a great place to start!
- Reward good drivers and don’t tolerate the bad ones!
- LASTLY – share your success stories with others; we can make a difference!

The FLETC’s Driver and Marine Division (DMD) has recently embarked on a number of LE driver training-related initiatives which are being conducted in order for us to provide the most up-to-date, sound LE driver program in the country.

The DMD is working with FLETC Training Research Branch and the Evaluations and Analysis Branch to create a Law Enforcement Driver Task Analysis Survey to help identify the specific driving requirements of our Partner Organizations.

In cooperation with our local FLETC Fleet Manager along with GSA Fleet Offices, the DMD is looking to capture non-fatal crash data (which is being largely over-looked) in order to help identify causes and trends which could help us identify areas for which training may help to reduce collisions.

To help address communication issues while delivering “instructor to student teaching” via the two-way radio, the DMD along with the Training Innovation Division is researching and testing alternative solutions to this problem.

In cooperation with the FLETC Media Support Division, the DMD has recently re-filmed the Lines-of-Travel for all four of our Emergency Response courses. The utilization of new technologies will help to create a video project which is expected to help the student recognize the visual cues for reading the various types of turns and lines-of-travel.

The DMD is currently researching other successful and validated LE driver training programs for lessons learned. Two such agencies include the United Kingdom and the Royal Canadian Mounted Patrol driver training programs.

In closing, the impact FLETC has had and continues to have on law enforcement driving around the country is mind boggling. A recent look at the graduate statistics dating back to 1975 for our Driver Instructor Training Program (DITP), now called the Law Enforcement Driver Instructor Training Program (LEDITP), shows that there have been approximately 3,195 total graduates from these two driver-instructor training programs. Of this number approximately 2,194 have been from state and local agencies. These numbers speak loud and strong - signifying the influence, impact and responsibility we have on law enforcement driver training around the nation. In response to this great responsibility, the staff and management of the DMD are committed to our Partner Organizations as well as to our state and local customers to ensure our driver training programs are current and provide our officers and agents with the knowledge, skills and abilities to be safe and effective LE drivers.

Law Enforcement Driving Is Not Normal Driving! ☆

Resources and Useful Websites:

www.nsc.org – National Safety Council

www.nhtsa.gov – National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

www.distraction.gov – (NHTSA)

safety.army.mil – U.S. Army Combat Readiness Safety Center

www.ODMP.org – Officer Down Memorial Page

Michael Robbs began his law enforcement career in 1980, serving with the Chattanooga Police Department for 11 ½ years. During this time he worked as a patrol officer, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) officer, Special Police Operations Team (SPOT) member, Communications Division supervisor, and he was an instructor in the Chattanooga Police Academy. Employed at the FLETC since July 1991, Robbs has instructed and/or managed in the Physical Techniques Division, Driver and Marine Division, Counterterrorism Division, and he was a program manager in the FLETC Orlando, Fla., office. In February 2012, Robbs was transferred back to the Driver and Marine Division in Glynco, Ga., where he is currently assigned as the Chief of the Basic Driving Branch.