



Simulator shows young drivers the risks of distraction

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY
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One of the most persistent challenges for teen-driving safety advocates is getting novice drivers to understand that their actions behind the wheel can have far-reaching implications.

Several advocacy groups around the USA are turning to a driving simulation program that focuses on the long-term consequences of distracted and drunken driving.

One Simple Decision, created by Virtual Driver Interactive Inc. (VDI), one of the nation's largest driving simulator manufacturers, seeks to modify driver behavior by showing drivers what can happen if they have a crash while driving under the influence or texting while driving. It combines simulated driving and interactions with police, judges and emergency medical personnel in an intense, 20-minute experience featuring a real judge, actual sheriff's deputies and EMTs.



Harry Mochel, now 19, of Rye, N.Y., experienced One Simple Decision about a year ago at a private driver's education school in Rye. "I'd been driving for a little while already," he says. "My parents had heard about it and said you should try it."

He says he was "driving" along on the simulator. "It tells you to start texting, so I took out my phone and started texting," he says. "I ended up crashing into a stop sign and got into a head-on collision. It's crazy to see how easy it was."

Just like real life, though, that was just the beginning of his troubles. "The real powerful part was that as soon as you got into the crash, the scene changes from the driving simulation scene to actual video footage of a cop walking up to you," says Mochel, now a freshman at Tulane University in New Orleans. "As he comes up, he shines a light in your face and says, 'Have you been drinking?'"

"Then you have the police booking you into jail, and the court," Mochel says. "It puts everything in perspective and makes it really realistic."

The Ohio Department of Transportation paid \$42,000 for four VDI simulators and uses the One Simple Decision program at events such as school days, football games and county fairs around the state, spokeswoman Melissa Ayers says.

"We recognized that there is an issue, especially among young drivers, with paying attention to the road," she says. "We started using it last year. We've gotten really good feedback. The kids realize after they've used it, 'I really can't do two things at once (while driving).'"

The program is catching on just as the federal government documents how widespread distracted driving is among the nation's youth and renews its push to curb it. Earlier this month, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood intensified his 3½-year fight against distracted driving, which he says accounts for about one in 10 road fatalities — 3,092 deaths in 2010.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also released the first-ever federal statistics on how widespread distracted driving is among the nation's youth. The CDC's 2011 anonymous national survey of more than 15,000 high school students found that 58% of high school seniors admitted to texting or e-mailing while driving during the previous month.

Bob Davis, the CEO and founder of Virtual Driver Interactive, says he created the One Simple Decision program after his research found that many teen drivers misunderstood the potential impact of their behavior while driving.

"I asked, 'What's the downside of texting while driving?' " Davis says. "They said, I know it's like a \$25 ticket, which is not that much money. They interpreted the law as the downside was a \$25 ticket. ... The (simulation) experience for the kids has to be a personal one to make it really effective."

VDI's surveys found that 86% of teens and young adults who had experienced One Simple Decision said they would rarely or never drive distracted in the future; 71% said the consequences of bad choices behind the wheel were worse or much worse than they first thought, the company says.

Toyota and Discovery Education use the software for their joint teen driving-safety program, Toyota Teen Driver. "I believe in it. I really do," says Kelly Fisher, Toyota's assistant manager for national philanthropy.

John Robert Elliott, 15, of Mouton, Ala., used the program during the just-ended school year at Lawrence County High School. "It helped me prepare to be on the road," says John Robert, who has his learner's permit. "It makes you think about what you do while you're driving."