

Researchers strive to solve dangerous distracted driving by cops

Jan. 23, 2015 at 7:40 AM

Jeff Rossen and Josh Davis

On Nov. 23, 2007, Jessica Uhl, 18, and her sister Kelli Uhl, 13, were in heavy post-Thanksgiving Day traffic on Interstate 64 as they headed home to their mother, Kim Schlau, in Collinsville, Illinois, after a holiday photo session at their father's home in the Illinois town of Mascoutah.

Matt Mitchell, an Illinois state trooper, was also on Interstate 64, responding to a call while talking on his cellphone and using his police computer. He crossed the median and plowed into the sisters' car at an estimated speed of 126 mph, killing them both instantly. Mitchell pleaded guilty to reckless homicide and reckless driving, lost his license, and can never be an officer again.

[share link](#)

Researchers strive to solve distracted driving by police

[Play Video](#)



[More video](#)



Fitbit fitness trackers can reveal personal info to police, landmark case shows

"After we learned all of the facts, we knew that this crash was completely preventable," Schlau said. "I had no idea that a lot of police officers have more training with their firearms than they do with their driving, yet they drive every part of their job."

Police officers are often brave and heroic, and their jobs are harder than ever, frequently requiring them to talk on their cellphones and police radios and even type on computers as they drive. The results can be tragic.

In May 2010, [a vehicle driven by an Austin, Texas, police officer ran a stop sign](#) and struck Louis Olivier on his motorcycle, injuring him seriously. The officer, Damon Dunn, admitted he was using a dashboard computer when he rolled through the stop sign. He received training, and the city agreed to pay Olivier \$250,000.

In September 2013, a Wright County Sheriff's Office deputy rolled his car into an embankment in Buffalo Township, Minnesota, while responding to a call. The car rolled 15 feet and landed on its roof; fortunately, no one was injured. An incident report states that the deputy was "on calls" while trying to park and didn't notice a steep ditch. He also received training.

Similar accidents have occurred in Missouri and other areas of the country. Police are being asked to do many things at once, and some experts say the brain isn't capable of it.

Officer Dion Mason of the Spokane, Washington, police department showed NBC News chief investigative correspondent Jeff Rossen the array of technology in his patrol car as he took Rossen on a ride-along: "I've got my patrol laptop, we've got the patrol radio, we've got the light and siren box right here." Mason said he also has his personal cellphone and work cellphone as he patrols, usually by himself, and admitted he has had some close calls while driving.

Bryan Vila, a professor at Washington State University in Spokane, is one of the world's leading experts on distracted police driving. He put Rossen behind the wheel in the driving simulator he uses to test officers' eye movement and reaction time.

Rossen's driving in the simulator was fine until Vila added a common police distraction: the onboard computer. After Rossen ran off the simulated road and spun out, review of his eye movement showed that his eyes were off the road, looking at the computer screen instead, for almost four seconds. "That's enough to cause a hell of an accident," Vila said.

There are "three easy solutions," according to Vila.

"One is to change the position of all this technology," he told Rossen. "Another thing: You can make it so the pieces that are most dangerous to do while you're driving turn off once you start driving." He cited the onboard computer in particular.

"And then the third thing, the obvious thing: Put another person in the car, like used to be the case in the old days."

Some departments across the country are already using some of these techniques. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, police officers' in-car computer won't allow them to keep typing after going 10 to 15 miles per hour. And in Fort Worth, Texas, after [NBC station KXAS started reporting on the issue](#), the chief of police ruled that officers aren't allowed to use their computers at all while driving, unless it's an emergency.