

Grand Forks safety advocates worry students too distracted by cell phones

More than 3,800 high school students in Grand Forks were observed crossing the street for a few days last spring and fall. About 267 of them crossed the street distracted. Their noses were buried in a text conversation on their phones or headphones were plugged into their ears.

By: [Brandi Jewett](#), Grand Forks Herald



Photo at left: Pedestrians cross University Ave. on UND campus

Traffic stops along University Ave. on the UND campus as pedestrians cross the busy street Thursday. photo by Eric Hylden/Grand Forks Herald

More than 3,800 high school students in Grand Forks were observed crossing the street for a few days last spring and fall.

About 267 of them crossed the street distracted. Their noses were buried in a text conversation on their phones or headphones were plugged into their ears.

In some situations, it was a combination of both, according to Carma Hanson, coordinator of Safe Kids Grand Forks who was recording her observations for a national study.

“What we found was very alarming,” she said, noting the grade-school fundamental of looking before crossing a street wasn’t being used. “It looked like it didn’t even enter their minds.”

Things don’t seem to get better as people age.

While he doesn’t have data, UND Police Chief Eric Plummer knows distracted pedestrians are a problem on campus as well.

“You see them looking down at iPods, tablets and phones,” he said. “I’ve even seen people reading books while walking.”

Plummer said most don’t bat an eye when they step off a curb into traffic. The university has plans to conduct a study similar to Safe Kids to see just how prevalent the problem is.

Hazards

The Grand Forks Safe Kids study focused on both middle and high school students.

Of the 4,814 observations recorded at four area schools, about 425 kids — or 9 percent of those observed — were crossing the street distracted.

Results of the Grand Fork study were submitted along with those from collected from 64 other schools in 16 states to Safe Kids Worldwide.

The Grand Forks results parallel those found nationwide, according to Hanson.

Nationwide, more than 34,000 kids were observed by Safe Kids staff. They found 20 percent of high schoolers crossed the street while sidetracked compared to about 13 percent of middle schoolers.

The top two distractions were texting on phones and listening to music.

In Grand Forks, Hanson said those who were preoccupied with a device seemed to assume it was safe to cross or they had the right away because they were in a crosswalk.

“When a car meets a person, it doesn’t matter who’s right or wrong,” she said. “The car wins every time.”

While pedestrians do have the right of way in a crosswalk, they can still get in trouble for darting out in front of vehicles, according to Plummer.

North Dakota state law prohibits suddenly walking or running into a car’s path if the car is close enough to be a hazard.

“There is a false sense of security with crosswalks,” Plummer said. “Cars and trucks don’t stop on a dime — especially if the road is covered in snow or ice.”

Put it down

Combating the problem posed by distracted pedestrians will start with educating students and parents about the risks.

While schools can teach kids to look both ways before crossing the street and to stay off devices until that crossing is made, Hanson said parents should reinforce those lessons.

“It’s not uncommon to see a third or fourth grader with a cell phone,” she said. “Parents need to have that conversation with their kids that this is a safety issue.”

Parents also should set rules about phone use and set an example for their children.

When it comes to adjusting the behavior of adults, things are a little trickier.

Plummer said his officers do stop a pedestrian if they notice him or her darting out in front of traffic or stepping into the road while distracted. Drivers also stopped and educated about the dangers of driving distracted.

“They teach you to be a defensive driver. You need defensive walking skills, too,” Plummer said. “Not every driver is paying attention.”

Both Hanson and Plummer say their organizations will continue to strengthen public safety campaigns to increase awareness of the problem.

(See Distraction by Numbers graph on next page)

Distraction by numbers

Local

Safe Kids Grand Forks observed children crossing the street at four local schools.

Valley Middle School:

9.6%

distracted

(655 total observations)



South Middle School:

26.1%

distracted

(348 total observations)



Red River High School:

6.8%

distracted

(1,667 total observations)



Central High School:

7.3%

distracted

(2,144 total observations)

Source: Safe Kids and Safe Kids Grand Forks

Nationwide

One in five high schoolers and one in eight middle schoolers were observed crossing the street while distracted.



1 in 5 High school students



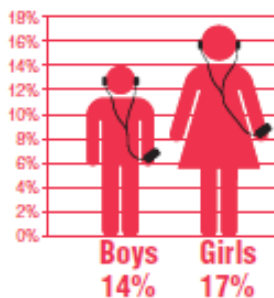
1 in 8 Middle school students

Teens who were distracted were most frequently texting or wearing headphones.

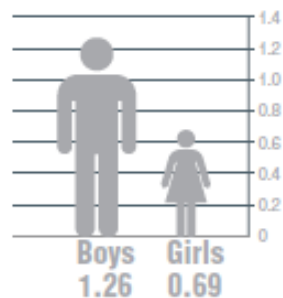


Girls are more likely to walk while distracted, but the pedestrian death rate is 1.8 times higher for boys.

Percent of students distracted



2011 Death Rate per 100,000



78 percent of teens perceive the most at-risk age group for pedestrian injuries to be one other than their own.

