Federal crash records note that distracted driving is a factor in nearly 80 percent of all crashes, contributing to more than 1.6 million crashes in the U.S. each year. Despite a growing number of studies showing that most drivers recognize that using a cell phone behind the wheel is risky, the distracted driving problem continues to worsen. CTS researchers are working to better understand this growing danger so that more effective countermeasures can be developed. The Center examines all forms of distraction, but is focusing primarily on distractions caused by new technologies that are either built into vehicles or carried into them. One major CTS study now underway seeks to answer several important questions, including:

- How does texting-while-driving affect a person’s driving performance?
- Do different types of mobile devices used for texting have any impact on the driver’s risk and level of distraction?
- How do driver demographics play into the risks associated with texting-while-driving?

Previous research on texting and driving performance is very limited and has only been conducted in driving simulators. Instead, this study will involve a closed course that contains common roadway obstacles, allowing researchers to observe how the driver’s performance changes when texting and driving. For each participant, at least two trials will be performed: one baseline trial during which the driver does not text-while-driving and then one or more trials during which the driver does text and drive, perhaps at varying levels of intensity (reading a text only, sending a text only, doing both, etc.)

Another study is examining how efforts to make cars safer with advanced warning systems can cause other safety concerns for drivers. The US DOT is supporting efforts for automobile manufacturers and their suppliers to develop communications systems that allow vehicles to ‘talk’ to each other and to the roadside. This nationwide system is called IntelliDrive. These systems offer great potential for enhanced safety systems that are currently only available through expensive on-board sensors, but researchers need to determine whether those warnings, and the alarms and flashing lights that come with them, can cause drivers to be distracted. TTI’s role in the NHTSA project, called Human Factors for IntelliDrive, is to help develop a set of tests to measure the distraction potential of the individual warning systems.