

Fear the texting dead? Dutch town adds LED strips for pedestrians

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A pedestrian checks her smartphone on Broadway in New York on Saturday, August 28, 2015. Photo by: Richard Levine/Corbis via Getty Images

It's a familiar scene: A group of pedestrians stand on a street corner, waiting for the crosswalk light to turn green. At least a few, if not all, are staring down at their smartphones. For whatever reason — whether scrolling through Instagram or engrossed in a game of "Cooking Fever" — they're not fully attuned to the traffic light ahead. A particularly unaware walker might even step into oncoming traffic.

They have been described as "smartphone zombies," by the Verge, an American technology news and media network. They have become a real concern — and one Dutch municipality wants to stem the problem before it gets worse.

Now officials in Bodegraven-Reeuwijk, about 25 miles south of Amsterdam in the western Netherlands, are piloting a program that they think may help protect such distracted pedestrians. At a handful of intersections around town, illuminated light emitting diode (LED) strips of light have been installed into the pavement. They are called "+Lichtlijn," or "light lines" in Dutch.

The "light lines" can change color and are synced with their corresponding traffic lights. As soon as the normal crossing light turns red or green, so, too, does the one in the ground.

Traffic Lights At Your Feet

The idea, officials said, is that people on their phones are going to be staring toward their feet anyway. Why not make it more likely that they will still be able to see the traffic light in their immediate peripheral vision?

"The lure of social media, games, WhatsApp and music is great, and it comes at the expense of paying attention to traffic," town alderman Kees Oskam said. "As a government, we probably can't reverse this trend, but we can anticipate problems."

The project has attracted criticism from Veilig Verkeer Nederland (VVN), a group that advocates for road safety in the Netherlands.

"What you are doing is rewarding bad behavior," a spokesperson for the group told DutchNews.nl about the light lines.

Nevertheless, schools in Bodegraven-Reeuwijk that are near the test light lines are reportedly excited about the pilot program. They are hoping it will increase safety.

HIG Traffic Systems, which developed the light lines, hopes other cities in the Netherlands will be interested in the system as well, according to Omroep West.

Distracted Walking In The U.S. Becoming Serious Problem

In the United States, "distracted walking" has becoming an increasingly serious problem. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 5,376 pedestrians were killed in the United States in 2015, up from 4,884 the year before. Nearly three-quarters of those deaths take place at "non-intersections," while 19 percent occur at places where pedestrians are meant to be, including crosswalks and sidewalks.

In 2015, for the first time, the National Safety Council included in an annual report statistics about distracted-walking incidents involving cellphones. The group found that distracted walking was responsible for more than 11,100 injuries between 2000 and 2011.

The council's list of pedestrian safety tips includes such age-old advice as "Look left, right and left again before crossing the street" but also now warns never to use a cellphone or other electronic device while walking.

"Walking is one of the best things we can do to stay healthy, but only if we put safety first," the group notes on its website.

Some Lawmakers Think Distracted Phone Users Deserve Penalties

Last year, a New Jersey lawmaker introduced a bill that would have banned walking and texting at the same time, as well as pedestrians from using phones, iPads or other communication devices that were not hands-free, the Associated Press reported. Violators could have been fined \$50, 15 days in prison or both.

"Distracted pedestrians, like distracted drivers, present a potential danger to themselves and drivers on the road," the bill's sponsor, Democratic state legislator Pamela Lampitt said at the time, according to the AP. "An individual crossing the road distracted by their smartphone presents just as much danger to motorists as someone jaywalking and should be held, at minimum, to the same penalty."