

Cell Phones and Highway Safety

The growth and popularity of cellular telephones has raised questions about whether this technology is compatible with highway safety. Minnesota's first attempt to regulate cell phone use while driving applies only to drivers under age 18, but other states have gone further.

Cell phone use is growing, including cell phone use in vehicles

Mobile phones, once primarily the province of business and the wealthy, have now reached almost every level of society. Cell phone service providers now have over 158 million subscribers nationally, an increase of over 125 percent in just five years.

Some surveys show that up to two-thirds of cell phone use is in motor vehicles, much of it done while the user is driving. With each innovation in cell phone technology (taking and receiving pictures, surfing the Internet, etc.) the potential for driver distraction grows. Department of Public Safety statistics show that "driver inattention or distraction" is the number one contributing factor in motor vehicle crashes, inevitably raising questions about whether cell phone use while driving poses a safety hazard.

Cell phone use as a contributing factor to crashes has also grown

In 2002 (the most recent year for which complete statistics are available), "driver on cell phone/CB" was cited as a contributing factor in one fatal crash, 85 injury crashes, and 137 property-damage crashes. These represent only a small percentage of all crashes, generally 0.2 percent or less, but when the statistic first began to be recorded, the percentages were 0.1 percent or less. From 1995, when the statistic was first kept, to 2002 the number of people killed or injured in crashes with cell phone/CB use cited as a contributing factor rose from 48 to 104.

Research has indicated a connection between cell phone use and higher crash risk

Nationally, there is considerable research to suggest that cell phone use is "associated with" an increased crash risk. A frequently cited article in *The New England Journal of Medicine* from 1997 found that use of a cell phone quadrupled the risk of a collision. A 2005 study published in the *British Medical Journal* found the same fourfold increase in injury crash risk when using cell phones while driving.

Although legislation in this area appears to assume that hands-free cell phones are safer to use in vehicles than hand-held models, research suggests that the potential safety hazards posed by each are about equal. To some extent this is due to the fact that "hands-free" models still require some manipulation to operate, but mostly it seems to be due to the fact that it is the distraction from the call itself, rather than from the device, that is the real hazard. Other research done for the National Safety Council has suggested that because of the active involvement of drivers in phone conversations, cell phones represent a greater threat of distractions than other activities such as listening to the radio.

States have dealt with phone use in vehicles in various ways

States have begun to attempt to deal with cell phone use in vehicles. New York was the first state to ban use of hand-held (but no hands-free) phones in vehicles, followed by New Jersey. A similar prohibition takes effect in Connecticut in October 2005. Among major cities, Washington, D.C., and Chicago have similar bans. Some states specifically have laws that allow local governments to ban or restrict cell phone use while some other states have laws that do the opposite.

Other state laws take a more narrow approach, prohibiting cell phone use by school bus drivers or by all bus drivers. A growing trend is to prohibit persons with learner's permits or provisional or intermediate licenses (issued to drivers under age 18) from using cell phones while driving.

Minnesota made its first efforts to control cell phone use in 2005

The 2005 omnibus transportation bill contained Minnesota's first foray into regulating cell phone use in vehicles when the state joined several others in sharply restricting cell phone use by drivers under age 18. Under the new law, scheduled to take effect January 1, 2006, persons with provisional driver's licenses (which are valid until the licensee turns 18) and persons under 18 who have learner's permits may not use cell phones while driving if the vehicle is in motion. There is an exception for calls made to obtain emergency assistance to prevent a crime, or with the reasonable belief that a person's life or safety was in danger.

The debate continues over the value of cell phone laws

The value of laws prohibiting or restricting cell phone use in vehicles continues to be debated. As noted, the application of broadly worded laws only to hand-held models means that they fail to address comparable safety hazards from hands-free models. Research from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety indicates that these laws can be expected to produce an immediate reduction in cell phone use in vehicles, but that this effect tends to wear off over time in the absence of continuous enforcement.

More generally, studies have differed over the effect that restrictions on cell phone use would have on crash rates, with some studies criticizing other studies for overstating the risk. Other researchers have pointed out that cell phones in vehicles have benefits: as reported in a study by the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis, these include expanded productive time, peace of mind, reduction in number and length of trips, faster emergency response time, and better apprehension of traffic violators and drunk drivers. These studies conclude that more quantitative information is needed about both costs and benefits before governments impose further regulations.

Cell phone use is likely to grow even further in the near future before stabilizing at a point of saturation. This suggests that the issue of cell phone use in vehicles will continue to be the focus of a significant highway safety debate.

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