

Study Finds Hands-Free Cellphone Laws Effective at Preventing Deaths, Injuries

New research finds that hands-free cellphone laws are associated with fewer driver deaths, and laws in 21 states allowing only hands-free cell phone use by drivers have prevented about 140 driver deaths and 13,900 driver injuries annually in the U.S.

The same research found that calling-only, texting-only, texting plus phone-manipulating and calling and texting bans are not linked to fewer driving deaths.

The effectiveness of hands-free laws over other could be due to greater compliance as hands-free cellphone laws clearly send the message that cellphones are not to be handled at all while driving. In addition, drivers may be more likely to believe that enforcement is possible when the laws govern cellphone use broadly, according to the study, [Bans on Cellphone Use While Driving and Traffic Fatalities in the United States](#) published in *Epidemiology*. The study was conducted by researchers at the [Center for Injury Research and Policy](#) at Nationwide Children's Hospital in Columbus, Ohio.

Traffic crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States relative to other high-income countries and drivers' cellphone use is a common traffic safety hazard. Cellphone use may involve manual distraction (hands off the steering wheel), visual distraction (eyes off the road), and cognitive distraction (mind off driving) and includes activities such as calling, texting, looking at apps and various other uses.

To combat the risks of using a cellphone while driving, states have implemented a variety of laws. As of June 2021, 21 of 50 states have implemented hands-free cellphone laws (that is, comprehensive handheld cellphone bans) that prohibit almost all handheld cellphone use including texting, calling and using apps. In addition, three states and the District of Columbia banned calling and texting, 24 states banned texting, and two states had no prohibition on cellphone use for drivers of any age.

The researchers looked at drivers, non-drivers (passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists), and total deaths involved in passenger vehicle crashes from 1999 through 2016 in 50 states, along with the presence and characteristics of cellphone use laws.

"We're not suggesting states take people's phones away while driving or tell them not to use their phone while driving," said Motao (Matt) Zhu, MD, MS, PhD, lead author of the study and principal investigator in the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's. "We're recommending that, if you need to use your phone while driving, you do so hands-free. Further, we recommend states implement hands-free cellphone laws to encourage this behavior change."

Zhu said the research demonstrates that hands-free laws “save lives and reduce the societal costs associated with distracted driving,” noting that hands-free laws have prevented about 140 driver deaths and 13,900 driver injuries annually.

Distracted driving-related crashes are a major burden on emergency medical and trauma systems and result in significant medical expenditures for treatment and rehabilitation. In Ohio alone, the associated societal costs for distracted driving-related crashes are about \$1.2 billion every year, which is equal to \$2,300 every minute.

Data for this study were obtained from Fatality Analysis Reporting System by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and LexisNexis.

Source: [Center for Injury Research and Policy](#) of the Abigail Wexner Research Institute at Nationwide Children’s Hospital