

Turn It Off: Cell Phones and Teen Safety

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the problem of cellular phone use among teen drivers (16-19). The author discusses the statistical and logical correlations between cellular phones and driving and accidental death among teen drivers. The author discusses the proposed bans on cell phone usage in the United States and explores its effectiveness and its limitations.

### Turn It Off: Cell Phones and Teen Safety

Cellular phones and motor vehicles do not mix well. A good friend of mine almost hit another car on the road. I asked her, "How did that happen?" She replied, "Well, I just wasn't paying attention. I just was talking on my cell phone." I implored her, as I implore everyone: "Turn It Off!" Cell phones are tied logically to the leading cause of death to teens, motor vehicle accidents.

Motor vehicle crashes, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens (16-19, accounting for more than one in three deaths in this age group (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). However, distracted driving (via Cellular Phone usage) accounts for 78 percent of all crashes (Elliot, 2007). Furthermore, 60 percent of all near crashes were the result of distractions (Elliot, 2007). One does not have to be an expert in statistics to figure out that at least 50% of motor vehicle deaths among teens are related to cell phones. Considering these statistics, distracted driving is more lethal to teens than cancer, heart disease, stroke, drug use, murder, recreational accidents, and general stupidity combined.

And, who is worse, young men or young women? Well, many researches hypothesize that young women will slowly become the worse drivers among the genders. According to an article in the Journal of American College Health, female drivers were 12.9% more likely to be using a cell phone while driving than men (as opposed to 8.26%). And, as cell phone use increases, along with cell phone sales, you can bet that the number of deaths among young adults will increase dramatically. And, with 46,000 new cell phone subscribers added every day, we will not have to wait long (Glazer, 2007). To put this statistic into perspective (for those living in the United States, one source suggests that a record three quarters of Americans own a cell phone (Elliott, 2007).

So, what about a cell phone ban? Well, several states already ban cell phones in the United States. Other countries in the world are following. Countries such as Japan have seen dramatic improvements in their mortality and morbidity rates. When Japan banned cellular phone use while

driving, accidents dropped by 75 percent within the month following the application of the ban. Would such measures really work? Well, not exactly. Some argue a ban will do little to correct the problem in the United States.

In a Nationwide Mutual Insurance survey, from 2008, researchers found that only 63% of drivers planned to abide by laws prohibiting cellular phones. Moreover, other research disagrees with the notion of distraction, at least its context, making the problem much more complex. Scientists at the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute released the findings of an important study in July of 2009. The study placed camera in the vehicles of participants cars for a year and monitored their driving and cell phone use. After examining the footage, which preceded crashes and near crashes, they concluded that manual manipulation of a cell phone (dialing or texting) led to a greater risk of an accident. No surprise here. However, simple participation in a phone conversation (talking or listening) did not lead to a significant increase in risk (Cruz & Oloffson, 2009). So, in a sense, cell phones distract us, but not necessarily while we converse. What does that mean to those trying to decrease the number of teen deaths from motor vehicles in the United States?

Cell phones (as least as the dialing and texting is concerned) can be deadly. David Strayer, a professor at the university of Utah suggests that only 2% of people are able to safely multitask while driving. That's not many people who probably should be driving while dialing and texting. Still, "Increasingly ubiquitous gadgets, such as onboard navigational equipment and cell phones, make greater demands for the attention of drivers" (Elliott, 2007). These gadgets just help to increase the problem. "Turn right at the next intersection [cell phone rings and driver answers]... turn left and proceed..." Can we take all of these interruptions and distractions? Well, honestly they do not help us focus on the road and its hazards.

Solutions? Well people need to be more vigilant in their driving. Aside from this moral and ethical necessity, in the next few months, "several start-up will release new products for phones that

can detect when a car is in motion and automatically log incoming calls and text as much as a personal assistant would" (Cruz & Oloffson, 2009). Moreover, expect more states to jump on the "banned" wagon. Still, people need to take responsibility for their actions.

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