Driving While Distracted

Cellphone use by drivers is causing thousands of deaths each year. Is a total ban the answer?

BY MATT RICHTEL

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August 2010: Two people died in this crash in Missouri caused by texting.

Do you think that cell phones should be completely banned while in cars? Choose a side and provide support for why you think what you think.
Christopher Hill's life changed forever on Sept. 3, 2008. Hill, then 20, was driving his Ford Ranger down a busy street in Oklahoma City and talking on his cellphone when he ran a red light and crashed into Linda Doyle's small SUV at 45 miles per hour. She was pronounced dead shortly after.

Later, a police officer asked Hill what color the light had been. "I never saw it," he answered.

In August 2010, a 19-year-old who was texting a friend while driving on a Missouri highway caused a pileup that killed two people, injured dozens, and left two school buses and a pickup truck in a crumpled heap. In 2008, an engineer driving a commuter train went through a red signal while texting and crashed into a freight train in Chatsworth, California, killing 25 people and injuring dozens.

These accidents are all part of a disturbing trend: In 2010, cellphone-related accidents killed 3,092 people and injured almost 600,000.

Now, the National Transportation Safety Board (N.T.S.B.) is calling for a complete ban on cellphone use by drivers. The N.T.S.B., the federal agency that promotes traffic safety and investigates accidents, is even urging states to ban drivers from using hands-free devices: It says drivers face serious risks from talking while driving, even when they don't have to take their hands off the steering wheel.

Extensive research shows the dangers of distracted driving. Studies indicate that drivers using cellphones are four times as likely to cause a crash as other drivers. In fact, the likelihood that they will crash is equal to that of someone with a blood alcohol level of .08 percent, the point at which drivers are generally considered intoxicated.

The concern is heightened by increasingly powerful phones that people can use not only to talk and text but also to e-mail, watch movies and TV shows, and play games, says Deborah Hersman, chairwoman of the N.T.S.B.

"Every year, new devices are being released," she says. "People are tempted to update their Facebook page. They are tempted to tweet as if sitting at a desk. But they are driving a car."

A disconnect between perception and reality worsens the problem. New studies show that drivers overestimate their own ability to safely multitask, even as they worry about others doing it.

**Cellphone Addiction**

Ten states now ban the use of handheld phones, and 35 states ban texting by drivers. No state currently prohibits using hands-free devices while driving.

Experts have long compared distracted driving to drunk driving. But Hersman says a better comparison is electronic devices behind the wheel.

A complete ban would also anger carmakers that are offering voice-activated dashboard systems that let drivers make calls and do other tasks. The Alliance for Automobile Manufacturers says the systems allow drivers to keep their hands on the wheel and their eyes on the road.

"Digital technology has created a connected culture in the United States, and it's forever changed our society," the alliance says in a statement. "Consumers always expect to have access to technology, so managing technology is the solution."

Hersman says the safety concerns aren't just about keeping hands on the wheel and eyes on the road.

"It's about cognitive distraction. It's about not being engaged at the task at hand," she says, adding: "Lives are being lost in the blink of an eye. You can't take it back; you can't have a do-over."

Christopher Hill knows that all too well. He pleaded guilty to negligent homicide, a misdemeanor, in the death of Linda Doyle; he was sentenced to probation and community service. These days, he rarely talks on his cell when he drives, even with a hands-free headset. When he's a passenger, it makes him nervous when the driver starts talking on the phone.

"I hope they don't have to go through what I did," he says, "to realize it's a problem..."

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**Cellphones & Driving: By the Numbers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of drivers texting or dialing on their cellphones at any given moment during 2010</th>
<th>Number of traffic-accident deaths in 2010 caused by drivers using cellphones</th>
<th>Percentage of Americans who say texting while driving should be punished as harshly as drunk driving</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>120,000</td>
<td>3,092</td>
<td>50%</td>
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**Matt Richtel is a technology reporter for The New York Times.**