

2015/10: Should drivers be banned from using all forms of mobile phone while operating their vehicles?

What they said...

'The ban would...send a clear message to drivers that "driving is for driving" - not for chatting, organising social events, holding business meetings, texting, reading, or any of the diverse in-vehicle activities that can divert attention and affect safe driving'

Ian J. Faulks, Honorary Associate in Psychology and Julia Irwin, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology at Macquarie University

'If you look at a lot of the stories in the media, you would believe there is an epidemic related to driver distraction. But in fact crash rates have been declining for well over a decade (yet) over the same period of time the number of (mobile phones) has increased exponentially'

Jeff Greenberg, Ford's senior technical leader for 'human machine interface'

The issue at a glance

On May 20, 2015, the results of the most recent Volvo Safety Index were released.

More than 90 per cent of the 1570 Victorian licensed drivers surveyed agreed mobile phone use reduced motorists' reaction times, while 81 per cent believed it caused more crashes.

An outright ban on drivers using phones in cars - even with a hands-free device - was backed by 43 per cent of the Victoria's motorists.

This was a view shared by 38 per cent of motorists in Queensland, 31 per cent in South Australia and 30 per cent in New South Wales.

The question of whether all these devices should be banned for drivers has been addressed by a number of state government committees.

To this point a ban has been placed on the use of hand-held devices, while learner driver and P1 drivers are permitted to use neither a hand-held nor a hands-free mobile phone when driving. All other drivers may use a hands-free device while operating a vehicle.

Background

(Most of the information found below has been abbreviated from the Wikipedia entry titled 'Mobile phones and driving safety')

The full text of this entry can be accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mobile_phones_and_driving_safety)

Mobile phone use while driving is common, but widely considered dangerous due to distracted driving. Many jurisdictions have made the use of a cell phone while driving illegal. Laws have been put in place to ban handheld mobile phone use, but most jurisdictions allow the use of hands-free devices.

In some cases restrictions are directed only to minors or those who are newly qualified license holders.

Accidents involving a driver being distracted by talking on a mobile phone have begun to be prosecuted as negligence similar to speeding.

In the United Kingdom, from 27 February 2007, motorists who are caught using a hand-held mobile phone while driving will have three penalty points added to their license in addition to the fine of \$60. This increase was introduced to try to stem the increase in drivers ignoring the law.

Japan prohibits all mobile phone use while driving, including use of hands-free devices.

New Zealand has banned hand held cell phone use since 1 November 2009.

Many states in the United States have banned texting on cell phones while driving. As of July 2010, 30 states had banned texting while driving, with Kentucky becoming the most recent addition on July 15.

Current legal situation in Australia regarding mobile phone use while driving

It is illegal in all Australian states and territories to use a hand-held mobile phone while driving. This includes talking, texting, playing games, taking photos or video and using other phone functions.

Using a hand-held mobile phone is also illegal when your vehicle is stationary but not parked (when stopped at a traffic light). It is illegal to use a hands-free phone while driving if it causes you to lose proper control of your vehicle.

Learner and P1 drivers are not permitted to use a hand-held or hands-free mobile phone while driving.

Internet information

On May 20, 2015, The Courier Mail published a news report titled, 'Mobile phone bans for drivers won't work, says AMTA'

The report featured the views of the chief executive officer of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, Mr Chris Althaus, who argued that such a ban would be unenforceable and may increase the risk of accidents.

The full text can be accessed at <http://m.couriermail.com.au/news/mobile-phone-bans-for-drivers-wont-work-says-amta/story-fnii5smp-1227365165988>

On May 20, 2015, The Brisbane Times reported that Queensland drivers caught using their mobile phones twice or more during a year will face a double demerit point penalty. The increased penalties are part of a number of strategies being employed in Queensland to reduce the hazardous use of mobile phones by drivers in that state.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/queensland-drivers-on-phone-face-double-demerit-points-20150520-gh5q57.html>

On May 13, 2015, news.com.au released a report titled 'Car safety expert controversially claims mobile phones are NOT causing crashes'

The report referred to claims made by Jeff Greenberg, Ford's senior technical leader for 'human machine interface' that there was no conclusive data demonstrating that enforcement of 'no mobile phone' laws reduced accident rates.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.news.com.au/technology/gadgets/car-safety-expert-controversially-claims-mobile-phones-are-not-causing-crashes/story-fn6vihic-1227353007181>

On February 26, 2015, The Daily Mail published a report titled, 'More than 500,000 motorists are STILL driving while using their mobile phones - and the numbers are increasing'

The report details statistics showing an increase in the illegal use of mobile phones by British drivers.

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2968776/More-500-000-motorists-driving-using-mobile-phones-numbers-increasing.html>

In October 2014, The Centre for Accident and Road Safety Research - Queensland produced a report titled 'State of the Road - mobile phone use & distraction while driving'

The report details a series of studies on the importance of undivided attention for safe driving and also summarises research on increasing mobile phone use by drivers and its effects.

The report can be accessed at http://www.carrsq.qut.edu.au/publications/corporate/mobile_phones_and_distraction_fs.pdf

On November 22, 2013, The Conversation published a comment by Ian J. Faulks, Honorary Associate in Psychology at Macquarie University and Julia Irwin, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology at Macquarie University. The article is titled 'Is it time to ban hands-free mobile phones while driving?'

The article considers the recent evidence suggesting the extent of the risk represented by mobile phone use and concludes that a ban, though difficult to enforce, would be worthwhile.

The full text can be accessed at <http://theconversation.com/is-it-time-to-ban-hands-free-mobile-phones-while-driving-20426>

On April 27, 2012, The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association made a submission to the New South Wales Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety's Inquiry into Driver and Road User Distraction.

The Association essentially argued that the extent of the threat represented by mobile phone use had been exaggerated.

The full text of the submission can be accessed at [http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/a10cf95798d9ad41ca257a0e001fb4ae/\\$FILE/Submission%2031%20-%20Australian%20Mobile%20Telecommunications%20Association.PDF](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parliament/committee.nsf/0/a10cf95798d9ad41ca257a0e001fb4ae/$FILE/Submission%2031%20-%20Australian%20Mobile%20Telecommunications%20Association.PDF)

On November 6, 2012, the ABC opinion site, The Drum, published an opinion piece by Chris Berg titled, 'Grandstanding about mobiles won't reduce the road toll'

Chris Berg, a Research Fellow with the Institute of Public Affairs, argued that a ban on mobile phones exaggerates the danger these devices represent and would be unenforceable.

The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-11-06/berg---mobile-phone-cars/4355632>

On July 3, 2012, Gizmag published an article titled 'Ford developing biometric systems to manage "driver workload"'

The piece reports on developments being made at Ford in human machine interface, whereby the car's communications system, including its inbuilt mobile phone and music system will respond to external road conditions and the physiological state of the driver to reduce in-vehicle distractions where appropriate.

The full article can be accessed at <http://www.gizmag.com/myford-touch-biometrics/23183/>

On December 16, 2011, The Huffington Post published an article by Mark Sedensky titled, 'Cellphone Ban in Cars Could Be "Impossible" To Enforce According To Law Enforcement'

Sedensky considers the extent to which a total ban on mobile phone use by drivers would be enforceable.

The full text of this report can be found at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/16/cellphone-ban-ntsb_n_1153453.html

On July 21, 2010, the ABC's Health & Wellbeing segment considered the question 'Can you drive safely and talk on a hands-free mobile phone?' The program concluded, 'No, using your mobile in any way while driving increases your risk of an accident.'

The program draws on the research of Professor Mark Stevenson, senior director at The George Institute at the

University of Sydney. Professor Stevenson was about to be appointed to the Accident Research Centre at Monash University.

The full text of the program can be accessed at <http://www.abc.net.au/health/talkinghealth/factbuster/stories/2010/07/21/2960092.htm>

Keep Your Eyes on the Road Org. Australia has produced an information brochure disputing the supposed impact of mobile phone use on the incidence of road accidents. These claims are supported by a range of Australian and overseas research.

The full text can be accessed at <http://www.keepyoureyesontheroad.org.au/pages/Accident-statistics-Cont>

Vic Roads has a section of its Internet site given over to warning drivers of the hazards associated with mobile phone use while driving. This information can be accessed at

<https://www.vicroads.vic.gov.au/safety-and-road-rules/driver-safety/mobile-phones-and-driving>

Arguments in favour of banning drivers from using mobile phones

1. Undivided concentration is an important factor in safe driving

It has been claimed that driving, as a complex, multifaceted task, cannot be performed safely without the driver's full attention.

A Queensland University of Technology (QUT) report released in October 2014 claimed, 'Data from naturalistic driving studies suggest that up to 22% of car crashes and near crashes and 71% of truck crashes (and 46% of near crashes) involve, as a contributing factor, distraction from non-driving related activities. The QUT study elaborated, 'Talking/listening to a hand-held device and dialling a hand-held device accounted for 7% of the total crashes and near crashes (3.6% each).

Inattention in the broader sense has been found to be a contributing factor in 78% of car crashes and 65% of near crashes. It has been estimated that 55% of all known sources of distraction are avoidable (61% of sources from within the vehicle and 31% of sources outside the vehicle).

Mobile phone use has been condemned as a particularly hazardous form of distraction. The interaction with another person who is unaware of the particular conditions pertaining for the driver means that the level of distraction can become highly diverting.

The following advice has been given by Vic Roads regarding the distraction hazards related to the use of mobile phones while driving. 'Physical distraction is caused by handling the phone while driving. For example, removing your hand from the steering wheel to dial a phone number, to answer or end a call.

Visual distraction is caused by the amount of time you have your eyes off the road. Taking your eyes off the road for just two seconds when driving at 50 km/h, means you travel for 27 metres effectively blind.

Cognitive distraction refers to lapses in attention and judgement. This happens when you have to perform two mental tasks at the same time. Having a conversation competes with the demands of driving - your attention is often changing from driving to the conversation. This results in unsafe driving and can increase the risk of a crash.'

It has been judged that talking to a passenger is less distracting than talking on a mobile phone. The Centre for Accident and Road Safety Research Queensland has stated, 'If a dangerous situation develops, the passenger can stop talking to allow the driver to concentrate. On a mobile phone, the other person is unaware of the danger and will continue talking, distracting the driver further when full concentration is required.'

In 2011 the World Health Organisation released a report titled 'Mobile Phone Use: a Growing Problem of Driver Distraction'. The report states, 'Distraction in traffic is... [a] risk and is becoming an increasing concern among policy-makers. Most research and attention in this area relates to driver distraction, largely because of drivers' increasing use of mobile phones and other technologies.'

2. Mobile phone use has been associated with increased accident rates

A variety of studies have linked mobile phone use with an increased risk of automobile accidents.

A Queensland University of Technology report released in October 2014 claimed, 'Using a mobile phone whilst driving is highly distracting and increases your risk of a crash four-fold.'

This claim was made in regard to serious road accidents resulting in hospital admission.

It has been demonstrated that text messaging while driving is especially dangerous. An Australian simulator study conducted in 2006 by the Monash University Accident Research Centre found that young novice drivers spent about four times as much time looking away from the road when texting than when not texting. This level of inattention was shown to lead to incorrect lane changes and wandering, and failure to see road signs, hazards and other road users.

Research conducted by Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents in 2001 and the Monash University Accident Research Centre in 2006 has shown that dialling, texting and talking on a mobile phone while driving can lead to riskier decision making - with attention and concentration diverted, a driver's ability to judge distances, speed, space and environmental conditions may be affected.

A widely cited 2005 Australian study reported the risk of crashing while using a hands-free mobile phone when driving is more or less equal to the risk of using a hand-held phone. This study essentially replicated earlier Canadian research, and is well-accepted by road safety researchers and policymakers. The Australian research was conducted by Suzanne P McEvoy, senior research fellow, Mark R Stevenson, professor of injury prevention and Mark Woodward, professor of biostatistics at the George Institute for International Health, University of Sydney; Anne T McCartt, vice president,

research at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Arlington, Virginia, USA; and Claire Haworth, research nurse, Peter Palamara, senior research officer, and Rina Cercarelli, senior research fellow at Injury the Research Centre, University of Western Australia.

The increasing use of mobile phones by young drivers has been noted as a particular cause for concern. A 2010 survey conducted by Australian Associated Motor Insurers Limited (AAMI) found that 61% of Australian drivers aged between 18 and 24 years reported that they had sent or received a text while driving (compared with 32% of drivers aged over 25 years). In addition, research conducted by Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has also demonstrated that undertaking secondary tasks while driving, such as using a mobile phone, causes greater problems for inexperienced drivers (who already have a higher crash risk).

3. The use of mobile phones by drivers is widespread

A 2011 federal government survey found that 93% of Australian drivers owned a mobile phone and, of these drivers, 59% reported using their mobile phone while driving, with 31% of drivers reading, and 14% sending text messages while driving. In addition, the study found that only 28% of drivers surveyed reported using a hands-free kit indicating that a large amount of mobile phone use while driving is conducted on hand-held mobiles.

A Queensland University of Technology survey of nearly 800 Queensland drivers found that 77% reported using their mobile phone for any purpose while driving, with approximately 40% of the sample doing so on a daily basis (either hands-free or hand-held). Overall, 25% of drivers reported using their hand-held mobile phone to answer calls on a daily basis, 20% of drivers reported doing so to make a call, 27% to read a text message and 14% to send a text message. In 2011 the World Health Organisation released a report titled 'Mobile Phone Use: a Growing Problem of Driver Distraction'. The report states, 'Studies from a number of countries suggest that the proportion of drivers using mobile phones while driving has increased over the past 5-10 years, ranging from 1% to up to 11%.'

Australian research suggests that one in six drivers report regularly sending text messages while driving. The proportion of drivers using text messaging while driving appears to be higher among young and/or inexperienced drivers. Australian data suggests that 58% of drivers aged 17-29 years regularly read text messages while driving, and 37% sent text messages.

4. Current control measures are not working

Laws prohibiting the use of hands held mobile phone devices have been consistently ignored by drivers.

Twelve years ago, in July 2003, the Victorian Transport Minister, Peter Batchelor and senior police complained that drivers were flouting the laws that prohibited motorists using a hand-held mobile phone while driving. In six months from January 2003 to July 2003 8757 Victorian -motorists lost demerit points for breaking this rule.

A growth trend was evident. Police figures showed that 30,154 fines were issued to Victorian motorists in 2002 for using a mobile phone. In 2001, 17,994 fines were issued.

That non-compliance with the law remains an issue Australia-wide was indicated by a decision taken by all Australian state and territory road safety ministers in 2011. The National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020, which the ministers drafted, aims to eliminate illegal mobile phone use by drivers by 2020.

Similar non-compliance with existing laws has been demonstrated in other jurisdictions.

In a report published on myFOXdc.com on March 24, 2015, it was stated, 'Drivers know that using handheld cell phones and texting while driving is dangerous, but many still do it. Maryland, D.C. and Virginia all ban texting behind the wheel. Drivers caught face fines, but the practice continues.'

John Townsend, with AAA Mid-Atlantic, stated with regard to the United States situation, 'What you will have to have will be tougher laws, tougher enforcement and tougher penalties.'

In Britain a similar pattern of non-compliance with existing laws has been noted. Some 1.6 per cent of Britain's estimated 36million drivers were spotted using a handheld phone while at the wheel in 2014 - up on 1.4 per cent for a similar exercise carried out five years earlier in 2009.

British road safety authorities have also called for stricter prohibitions on the use of mobile phones by drivers. The British Transport Minister, Robert Goodwill, has stated, 'No phone-call is worth risking an accident. That is why in 2013 we increased the penalty for people using a mobile phone at the wheel...We will keep further deterrent measures under consideration.'

5. A total ban on mobile phones would have a powerful educative effect

It has been claimed that prohibiting the use of any form of mobile phone device would send a powerful message to all drivers regarding the hazards associated with mobile phone use while driving.

Such a law would remove confusion over what is and is not allowable inside a vehicle in terms of mobile phone use. It should put an end to the continuing use of hand-held devices by some drivers.

Some critics of such a prohibitive response have claimed that it would be merely 'symbolic' as it could never be completely enforced. Supporters of such a measure claim that its symbolic effect would be among its great strengths as it would strong educative effect, demonstrating to all drivers that law enforcement agencies and road safety authorities do not condone the use of mobile phones in cars.

In an article published in The Conversation on November 22, 2013, Ian J. Faulks, Honorary Associate in Psychology at Macquarie University and Julia Irwin, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Director of Undergraduate Studies in Psychology at Macquarie University stated, 'The ban would...send a clear message to drivers that "driving is for driving" - not for chatting, organising social events, holding business meetings, texting, reading, or any of the diverse in-vehicle activities

that can divert attention and affect safe driving.'

The authors further stated, 'Such a ban could be accompanied by an educational campaign spanning schools, driver training, public advertising, and traffic offender management.

We need to make it clear that if you wish to make or take a call when driving, pull over and stop. And for a simpler, easier tip: put the phone in the boot of the vehicle until you reach your destination.'

Arguments against banning drivers from using mobile phones

1. Claims that mobile phones are a safety risk have been disputed

Claims about the extent of the accident risk posed by mobile phone use by drivers have been vigorously disputed. It has been suggested that estimations based on simulator predictions have not been borne out in real world experience.

Keep Your Eyes on the Road, an Australian-based road safety organisation has stated, 'While mobile phones are a real distraction in the car and their use can result in serious accidents, real life accident data indicates that mobile phone use does not contribute significantly to crashes or fatalities.

A study that analysed more than eight million actual hands-free phone calls placed over a period of five years found only two confirmed cases of crashes that occurred during phone use.

Looking at United States data, Keep Your Eyes on the Road states, 'Some state highway authorities in the US have compiled detailed information on crash statistics and have specifically listed using a cell phone or two-way radio as a contributing cause for the crash. For example, in Minnesota in 2007 "Driver on Cell Phone or CB Radio" accounts for some 0.2% across single or multiple vehicle crashes across all age groups. The Tennessee Department of Safety has data available from 2003 to 2007 using a "Telephone or Two-Way Radio", which listed these factors as the cause of an accident in 0.35% in 2003; 0.32% in 2004; 0.36% in 2005; 0.37% in 2006 and 0.33% in 2007.' The incidence of mobile-phone-related accidents in the United States would appear to be very small.

Drawing on recent Australian data, Keep Your Eyes on the Road has made similar claims. 'A recent analysis of 340 serious casualty crashes in Victoria and NSW between 2000 and 2011, using data gleaned from forensic examination of crash scenes and anonymous interviews with drivers has found that in 0.9 per cent of crashes the driver was using a mobile phone.'

The same study found other factors that appeared to be far more significant. '[T]he Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) found that intoxicated drivers caused 13.5 per cent of crashes, drivers falling asleep resulted in 11.8 per cent of crashes and 3.2 per cent of crashes were caused by passenger interactions.'

It has further been claimed that the extent of mobile phone use by drivers has been exaggerated. Jeff Greenberg, Ford's senior technical leader for 'human machine interface' told international media at a conference at Ford's Detroit headquarters in May 2015, '[T]here is no distracted driving epidemic'

Mr Greenberg went on, citing United States and worldwide trends, 'If you look at a lot of the stories in the media, you would believe there is an epidemic related to driver distraction. But in fact crash rates have been declining for well over a decade (yet) over the same period of time the number of (mobile phones) has increased exponentially. And so the epidemic of crashes that we might expect, we don't really see reflected in the data, and that's really puzzling to a lot of researchers.'

2. Banning drivers from using mobile phones would increase risky driver behaviour

Chris Althaus, the chief executive of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, has claimed that criminalising all phone use by drivers would not increase driver safety.

Mr Althaus has argued that a total ban would result in some drivers trying to hide their use of mobiles.

Referring to the suggested ban, Mr Althaus stated, '(This) would increase the danger of crashes. The simple act of holding a phone beneath window height or on a driver's lap to avoid detection increases a driver's need to look away from the road.

(This is) the very thing the new national road rules are trying to avoid by placing mobile phones in cradles on the dashboard or out of sight in a driver's pocket when using Bluetooth hands-free devices.'

A 2010 study conducted by North America's Insurance Institute for Highway Safety after 30 US states introduced bans on mobile phone use found the strict new laws led to an increase in crashes.

The report stated, 'This unexpected consequence of banning texting suggests that texting drivers have responded to the law, perhaps by attempting to avoid fines by hiding their phones from view.

If this causes them to take their eyes off the road more than before the ban, then the bans may make texting more dangerous rather than eliminating it.'

3. A ban on mobile phone use by car drivers would be unenforceable

A mobile phone ban on drivers could not be policed effectively and so would be unenforceable.

Mobile phones are now also used to transmit music and recorded books and as GPS devices. Unless such applications were also banned, it would be impossible for any police officer to determine the use to which a mobile phone device was being put. It would also be extremely difficult for police to determine whether a driver were speaking on a mobile phone or to a passenger.

In October 2010, Dr Tom Dingus, the Director of the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, stated, 'There are many national campaigns advocating no cell phone use at all while driving, however, it may not be realistic in today's multi-tasking society.'

In December 2011, the United States National Transportation Safety Board stated that drivers should be barred from

using hand-held and hands-free mobile phone devices. The call met with immediate concerns that such a ban would be unenforceable.

On December 16, 2011, Mark Sedensky, writing for the Huffington Post, conjectured, 'A driver in the next lane is moving his lips. Is he on a hands-free cellphone? Talking to someone in the car? To himself? Singing along to the radio? If lawmakers follow the advice of a federal board, police officers will have to start figuring that out - somehow.'

France is one of many countries in which it is illegal to use a hands-held phone while driving. In 2002, the French government considered introducing a total ban on the use of mobile phones in cars, including a ban on hands-free devices. However, this proposal was rejected because of concerns that the French police would not be able to enforce the new regulation as they would not be able to differentiate between a driver talking to someone else in the car or singing along to the radio and using a hands-free mobile phone to have a conversation.

It has been claimed that having unenforceable laws is undesirable as it creates a careless disregard for the law among citizens. Chris Berg stated, 'A society should try not to have too many unenforceable laws. They breed contempt for the law as an institution. If people get used to disobeying one law, they may become comfortable with disobeying others.'

4. There are measures already in place to reduce dangerous mobile phone use

It has been claimed that many of the measures currently in place are effective in reducing possible risks associated with mobile phone use in vehicles.

Currently Victorian motorists can legally use a mobile phone while driving via Bluetooth or another hands free connection. However, to ensure that the mobile phones do not become a distraction, drivers are required to place their phones in a holder or cradle. If they do not do so, they are fined \$443 and lose four demerit points.

It has also been suggested that further driver education in the safe use of mobile phones in vehicles would be beneficial.

Chris Althaus, the chief executive of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, has claimed that such education would ensure that drivers were aware of the need for safe practices and what these are.

Ms Althaus said educating drivers about using hands-free technology safely would be more effective than an outright ban. He said drivers should never text, always keep their eyes on the road, install a phone cradle in their cars and use their smartphone's voice-activated dialling and answering features to remain safe. He also noted that motorists should also avoid using their phones altogether in heavy traffic, at intersections, in bad weather or in poor road conditions.

As part of the National Road Safety Strategy 2011-2020 all Australian states and territories have begun targeting the clearly dangerous, illegal and unacceptable practice of text messaging and driving, which has been shown to have the highest risk factor with a 23.2 times greater risk of a crash or near crash (compared to listening and talking, which has only a 1.3 times greater risk).

There has also been increased enforcement support, awareness campaigns and the adoption of new national road rules requiring drivers to use their mobiles in approved cradles to help ensure that the risk of reaching for mobiles in cars is reduced. This is intended to ensure that drivers' eyes are forward looking over the roadway, reducing risks of taking their eyes off the road.

5. Other in-car activities are more distracting than mobile phones

It has been claimed that a range of other activities typically performed by drivers are more distracting than the use of mobile phones.

A study of 9000 Norwegian drivers who had recently reported an accident to their insurance companies found that both radios and CD players appear to cause more accidents than mobile phones.

Australian research conducted by Monash University's Accident Research Centre (MUARC) also found the effects of distraction was more pronounced during car stereo tasks than during hands-free mobile phone tasks.

Similarly, a 1993 study by the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute found changing cassette tapes to be more distracting than talking on a mobile phone. Reading a map, which was found to be the most distracting task, was nearly twice as distracting.

Spilling hot coffee and dropping something on the floor were two of the distractions drivers cited most frequently as reasons for their road traffic accidents, according to a study by the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS).

Fiddling with a radio or climate control system is the next most-cited distraction. The study also found that some commuters regularly read the newspaper, shave, or apply make-up on their way to work.

A study of more than 2,700 crash scenes involving distracted drivers and nearly 4,500 drivers by the Virginia Commonwealth University found looking at traffic, crashed and roadside incidents was the primary distraction in 16 per cent of the crashes studied, followed by driver fatigue, 12 per cent; looking at scenery, 10 per cent; passenger and child distractions, nine per cent; and adjusting the radio, CD or tape player, seven per cent. Mobile phones were cited as the primary distraction in slightly more than five per cent of the crashes studies.

Further implications

Research has indicated some increase in driver distraction as a result of mobile phones and has linked distraction to a likely increased incidence of accidents. However, real world data, as opposed to that produced via simulators, has not shown the dramatic increase in accidents that the high level of mobile phone use would appear to predict.

Thus, the need for a total ban on the use of all types of mobile phones by car drivers depends on one's perspective.

Such a ban is likely to produce some reduction in the road toll; however, relative to focusing on other causes of accidents the reduction is likely to be small. Therefore the question remains is the imposition of such a ban justified by the level of increased road safety it would produce.

Though it has been claimed that such a ban would be difficult to implement, technological advances could be used to make it possible for traffic police to detect when drivers were using mobile devices.

Fred Mannering, a Purdue University civil engineering professor who is associate director of the United States Center for Road Safety, has claimed that since all mobile phones emit signals, a Bluetooth detection device could be used to determine if a driver were using a mobile phone.

Computers are already common in patrol cars, and Professor Mannering has suggested that a relatively cheap add-on could fit them to track mobile phone signals.

However, critics argue that such a procedure would fail to determine the extent of the distraction being caused by the mobile phone use and so any prosecutions as a result of such devices may well be extreme and unnecessary.

Such procedures would make it possible to detect and charge drivers using hands-free technology to listen to music, recorded books or as GPS devices. Given that using paper maps has been shown to constitute a significantly higher distraction, it seems counter-productive to use detection technology to prohibit the use of these devices.

This is an issue which is likely to be resolved through the use of in-car technology by all drivers. Modern vehicles are increasingly being sold equipped with built-in communications systems that include mobile phone connectivity. Such vehicles allow the mobile phone and many other features within the car to be voice operated, thus removing the distractions currently associated with sound systems using CDs or cassettes and dial or push-button-operated radios. There is even technology being developed to monitor road conditions and the physiological state of the driver so that the in-car distractions s/he receives can be appropriately reduced. Thus, in demanding driving situations, mobile phone communication could be automatically blocked.

(Please note: the observations made above relate to general mobile phone use by drivers. Research in many jurisdictions has demonstrated that texting while driving creates a much higher risk of accident than engaging in mobile phone conversations while driving.)

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

Herald-Sun: September 22, 2014, page 20, editorial, 'Young drivers must hang up'.

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/young-drivers-must-hang-up-mobiles/story-fni0ffsx-1227065681674>

NOTE: there are more newspaper items (with other sources) in the section Web Links and Documents.