

Drivers ignore the risk of mobile phone use

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A George Institute road safety study has revealed an alarmingly high rate of mobile phone use amongst Australian drivers. Published in the Medical Journal of Australia this week, the survey conducted in NSW and WA found that 60% of drivers use a mobile phone whilst behind the wheel, resulting in crashes and negligent driving.

Almost 3 million drivers across the two states use a phone while driving. Men, younger drivers and metropolitan residents were found to be the worst offenders. In addition to talking on the phone 12% of drivers admit to writing text messages, while among young drivers, over 30% write text messages while on the road. Young drivers were almost five times more likely than older drivers to use a phone while driving.

“The Australian public are not getting the message that mobile phone use whilst driving is a dangerous activity. The risk of a crash increases four-fold when using a mobile phone, irrespective of whether you are using a hand-held or a hands-free device. Based on the results of our study an estimated 45,000 drivers have crashed while using a mobile phone, and over the past year more than 145,000 drivers have experienced a ‘near miss’ due to talking on the phone,” said Dr Suzanne McEvoy, Senior Research Fellow at The George Institute.

Although the use of hand-held mobile phones while driving is illegal, almost 40% of drivers continue to use a hand-held phone while driving. Seventy percent of drivers felt that they were unlikely to be caught by police for using a hand-held phone while driving.

“Drivers are aware of the law against hand-held mobile phones, but believe that enforcement is quite low. These data clearly demonstrate the need to enhance enforcement of this legislation. However, given that hands-free devices do not necessarily reduce the risk, drivers should limit all phone use while driving” Dr McEvoy added.

Research by The George Institute into the broader issues of driver distraction, shows that drivers are engaged in a distracting activity once every six minutes. During a given driving trip, 72% of drivers will report a lack of concentration, 69% will adjust in-vehicle equipment, 58% are distracted by outside events, objects or people and 40% will talk to passengers, all of which account for thousands of driver errors and crashes each year. In fact, one in every five crashes in this study was caused by driver distraction.

The most common adverse effects of mobile phone use while driving were taking eyes off the road, slowing down, lack of concentration, failing to indicate, lane drift and sudden braking.

“Action is urgently needed to reduce crashes caused by mobile phone use and driver distraction. Policies that include increased driver awareness and innovative enforcement practices are essential to decrease the occurrence of these behaviours and reduce adverse outcomes,” said Dr McEvoy.

Young drivers are consistently over-represented in crash statistics, and were also found to be much more frequently distracted while driving. Compared to older drivers, this group perceived distracting behaviours to be less hazardous, yet they were significantly more likely to report a crash resulting from distraction.

Source: Research Australia

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