

New study finds hands-free cellphone laws associated with fewer driver deaths

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Traffic crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States (U.S.),

relative to other high-income countries. 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 (i.e., comprehensive handheld cellphone bans), which prohibit almost all handheld [cellphone use](#) including texting, calling and using apps. In addition, three states and the District of Columbia (DC) banned calling and texting, 24 states banned texting, and two states had no prohibition on cellphone use for [drivers](#) of any age.

A recent study led by researchers at the Center for Injury Research and Policy at Nationwide Children's Hospital looked at drivers, non-drivers (passengers, pedestrians, bicyclists, motorcyclists), and total deaths involved in passenger vehicle crashes from 1999 through 2016 in 50 U.S. states, along with the presence and characteristics of cellphone use laws.

The study, published today in *Epidemiology*, found that hands-free cellphone laws were associated with fewer driver deaths, but calling-only, texting-only, texting plus phone-manipulating and calling and [texting](#) bans were not. This could be due to greater compliance; 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.

"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, Ph.D., 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 continued, "Our research demonstrates that hands-free laws save lives and reduce the societal costs associated with distracted driving. We found that hands-free laws have prevented about 140 driver deaths and 13,900 driver injuries annually in the U.S."

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, 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.

More information: Motao Zhu et al, Bans on Cellphone Use While Driving and Traffic Fatalities in the United States, *Epidemiology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1097/EDE.0000000000001391](https://doi.org/10.1097/EDE.0000000000001391)

Provided by Nationwide Children's Hospital

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