

Research urges police to consider dangers of drivers using their phones hands-free, as well as handheld

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A research team including Keele's Dr. Helen Wells have highlighted the dangers of hands-free mobile phone use to police, urging them not to

recommend it as a "safe alternative" to motorists who are caught using their phones hand-held.

The project, called "[We need to talk about hands-free](#)," was led by the Open University (OU) and involved academics from the Universities of Keele and Staffordshire.

While hands-free [mobile phone](#) use by drivers is not illegal, a vast body of research has shown it is no safer than hand-held phone use.

This latest project was aimed at police officers, who are at the frontline of dealing with the devastation that distracted driving can cause, to ensure they are fully informed.

Its findings have been revealed at a time when the National Police Chiefs' Council is focusing on a campaign, which lasts until 10th March, to crackdown on people being distracted by their mobile phone while driving.

Changing police attitudes

A total of 470 officers from England and Wales took part in an interactive video task designed by researchers at the OU.

The video features in [Are you a focused driver?](#) on the OU's OpenLearn platform and can be used by anyone who wants to understand just how distracted they are when they use their phone while driving.

Following the task, officer attitudes to the safety of legal hands-free mobile phone use by drivers dramatically changed, with 88% reporting that, in future encounters with phone-using drivers, they would explain the dangers of all phone use, not just hand-held use.

Improving road safety

Now, Chief Constable Jo Shiner, the National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Roads Policing, is urging drivers to carefully consider the findings.

She said, "I welcome any research which progresses our understanding of risk and how it can be removed from our roads."

She added, "This is a positive step forward in terms of preventing harm and reducing fatal and serious collisions. This work should be applauded and carefully considered by everyone who uses the roads."

Ruth Purdie OBE, chief executive of The Road Safety Trust, said, "Evidence shows that hands-free is as dangerous as physically using a mobile phone.

"The cognitive distraction can increase crash risk, reduce hazard detection, and lead to poor situational awareness.

"Therefore, it is vital, as this report highlights, that police officers are not recommending hands-free as a safe alternative to illegally using a hands-free device.

"We hope this project can shine a light on the issue and provide officers the guidance they need when encountering offenders."

Dr. Helen Wells, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Keele, was one of the research authors and said, "When a police officer stops someone for using their mobile phone illegally they have an opportunity to give safe or unsafe advice to a driver. Our project means that more officers will now give advice that will keep drivers safe, not just keep them out of trouble with the law."

Professor of Applied Cognitive Psychology at the OU, Gemma Briggs, said, "Research emphatically demonstrates that hands-free phone use is no safer than hand-held phone use due to the cognitive distraction it causes. The problem is not many people realize this, and many resist these research findings.

"This project has highlighted the importance of the advice that is given being focused on safety, not just legality."

Existing research shows drivers using either a hand-held or a hands-free phone are four times more likely to be involved in a collision, often fail to notice hazards—even when they appear directly ahead of them—and take longer to react to any hazards they do notice.

Staffordshire University's Dr. Leanne Savigar-Shaw, who is a senior lecturer in policing, added, "We hope that this research helps to open up conversations between [police officers](#) about the risks of using hands-free devices and continues to inform their interactions with drivers. That is important to support efforts to improve the safety of our roads."

Provided by Keele University

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