
Center Recommendations on Driving While Talking on the Telephone

While there appears to be broad agreement that driving while talking on the phone is a distraction, there is little agreement as to how great the distraction really is. A Canadian study concluded that cell phone use behind the wheel quadruples the risk of an accident for the duration of the conversation, making it similar in risk to driving while at the legal limit for alcohol consumption. At the other extreme, a study by the Highway Safety Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel ranks the use of a cell phone while driving eighth among a laundry list of distractions that can contribute to an auto accident. And a number of studies fall somewhere in between. Meanwhile, there is no agreement as to whether the most oft-suggested solution, hands-free telephone sets, really represents an improvement since talking on the telephone engages the mind.

There is, however, broad agreement on one need. That is the need for further information. Several factors contribute to this information gap: (1) It makes sense intuitively that a number of drivers would be reluctant to admit they were talking on the telephone at the time of an accident. (2) The State Highway Patrol does not have a box to check on the state's accident report form that would provide a handy way of indicating cell phone related accidents or other driver distractions. While the first factor—reluctance to admit fault—may be an ingrained aspect of human nature, the second is easily remedied. Thus, the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research offers the following recommendations:

1) The N.C. Division of Motor Vehicles should revise its accident report form to include frequent driver distractions—including cell phone use—prior to January 1, 2003. This would permit better tracking by the state and provide additional insight into the role cell phones play in automobile accidents. Perfect

clarity is not achievable due to driver reluctance to admit cell phone use or any other distraction, but this simple step would improve the now-murky picture.

2) The State Highway Patrol should generate reports at two and four-year intervals indicating the percentage of accidents caused by various driver distractions and provide this information to the North Carolina General Assembly's Joint Legislative Transportation Oversight Committee. The patrol should report to the legislature's transportation oversight committee on the use of cell phones in vehicles involved in accidents—if the committee is reauthorized in 2003—or it should report to another standing legislative committee given this responsibility by the legislature's leadership.

3) The 2005 N.C. General Assembly should establish a study commission to review the data generated through revised accident report forms and then decide whether to recommend banning or regulating the use of cell phones in automobiles; legislative consideration should come earlier if accident reports or other clear and convincing evidence requires more urgent action. While cell phones clearly do distract drivers, additional accident information and further research should clarify the degree of danger they truly represent. If cell phone use while driving causes accidents in greater proportion than other distractions, the legislature should consider regulating or banning the devices. Until the answers are clear, the best solution may be for drivers to exercise caution and use common sense when it comes to driving and talking on the phone.

—Mike McLaughlin

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