Center for Mississippi Health Policy

ISSUE BRIEF

DISTRACTED DRIVING IN MISSISSIPPI

AN UPDATE

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The use of mobile devices while driving increases driver distractions that elevate crash risks. Most states have enacted laws designed to prevent crashes due to mobile device distractions while driving. Mississippi has enacted some distracted driver restrictions and considered others. This brief summarizes the available evidence and outlines policy considerations to inform the debates.

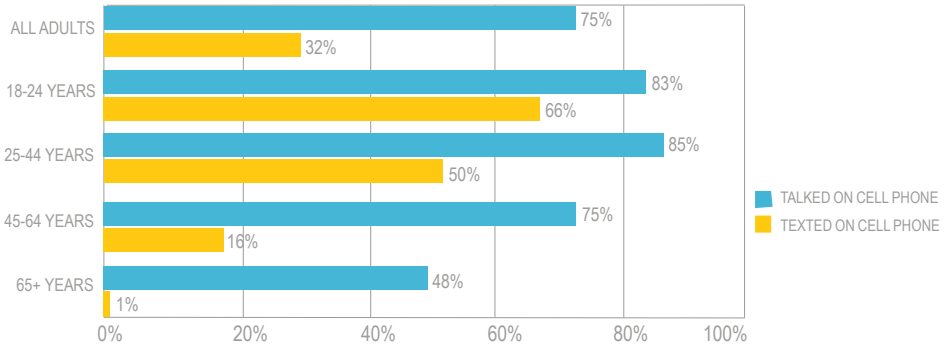
1 out of 12 motor vehicle crash deaths is distraction related.

In 2010, researchers from the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University were commissioned by the Center for Mississippi Health Policy to conduct a scientific survey to assess distracted driving behaviors, attitudes, and opinions of Mississippi adults. Adults surveyed reported the following:

- Most (75%) had talked on a cell phone and one-third (32%) had texted while driving.
- Nearly half (49%) experienced an adverse event when driving while using a mobile device.

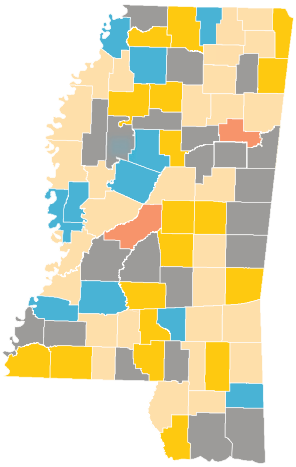
In addition, the researchers discovered distracted driving behaviors were significantly ($p<.01$) more frequent among the younger age groups (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. MISSISSIPPI ADULTS SELF-REPORTED DISTRACTED DRIVING BEHAVIORS BY AGE GROUP, 2010



Source: Cross, G. et al. (2010). Mississippi State University, Social Science Research Center.

MISSISSIPPI MOTOR VEHICLE DEATH RATES BY COUNTY, 2008-2012



- LESS THAN 10 DEATHS PER 100,000
- 10-19 DEATHS PER 100,000
- 20-29 DEATHS PER 100,000
- 30-39 DEATHS PER 100,000
- 40 OR MORE DEATHS PER 100,000

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2013).

Widespread mobile device use while driving is of concern, as distracted driving contributes to 1 out of 12 crash-related deaths. From 2008 to 2012, over 3,000 lives were lost in Mississippi due to motor vehicle crashes. Statewide, motor vehicle crashes remain the top cause of death for those less than 45 years of age.

Although the state motor vehicle crash death rate has declined, it remains higher than the national rate. From 2008 to 2012, the average crash death rate in the state was double the U.S. death rate and 8 times above the rates of states with the lowest crash death rates. Some counties in Mississippi (see sidebar) experienced more than twice the statewide crash death rate of 23 per 100,000 persons.

Safety, Health, and Economic Impacts of Distracted Driving

MOTOR VEHICLE CRASH INJURY MEDICAL COST, U.S.

TREATMENT TYPE	COST PER INJURY
Treat & Release	$3,362
Hospital Admission	$56,674

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014).

TYPES OF DISTRACTIONS

Visual- taking your eyes off the road.
Mental- taking your mind off driving.
Manual- taking your hands off the wheel.

The reasons distractions while driving are a serious risk to public health and safety are well documented. Mobile device use when driving is linked with improper following distances, poor lane positioning, and slower reaction times. Texting while driving is a particular threat to road safety because it involves visual, mental, and manual driver distractions (see sidebar). Texting drivers have a risk of experiencing a dangerous traffic event that is 23 times higher than those not driving distracted.

Research shows that for each motor vehicle crash death, more people are hospitalized for serious injuries and treated for moderate injuries in emergency departments. In Mississippi during 2011, there were 442 life-threatening injuries, 4,064 moderate injuries, and 13,562 minor injuries related to motor vehicle crashes. Based on the average medical cost of treating moderate to severe crash-related injuries (see sidebar), the cost in Mississipi was an estimated $38.6 million in 2011. High risk behaviors related to distracted driving contribute to the costs.

Policies Enacted By States

PRIMARY ENFORCEMENT

Law enforcement officers can cite drivers directly for texting or using a hand-held mobile device while driving.

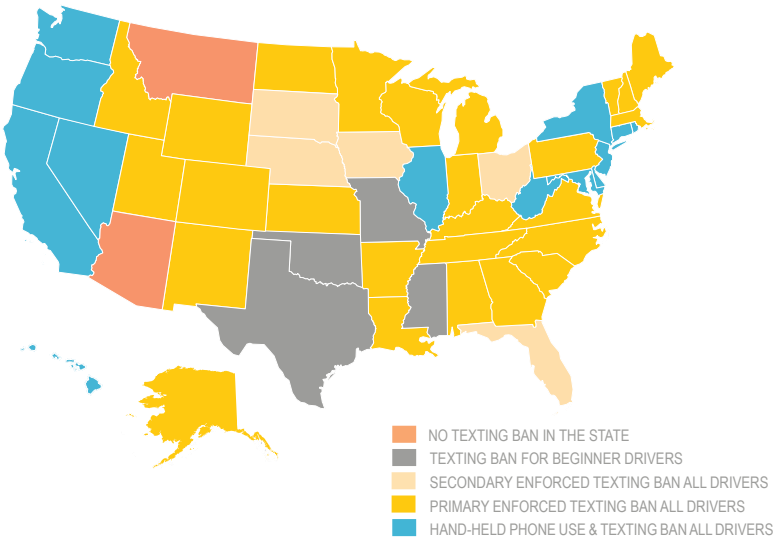
SECONDARY ENFORCEMENT

Law enforcement officers must pull a driver over for another reason before they can give a citation to a driver for texting or using a hand-held mobile device while driving.

The health and economic toll of distracted driving has spurred legislative action in nearly every state, but policies vary (Figure 2) by the type of driver affected and enforcement mechanism (see sidebar). All but two states have enacted some type of texting ban– Mississippi, Texas, Oklahoma, and Missouri limit their bans to beginning drivers with a learner's permit or intermediate license. Mississippi law prohibits any mobile device use by beginning drivers and by bus drivers with young passengers aboard. Twelve states ban hand-held mobile phone use for all drivers.

Enforcement issues have been a key topic of policy debate. Law enforcement officials cite the difficulty in distinguishing between a driver who is texting and a driver dialing a cell phone to make a call, and note that texting bans are easier to enforce when there is an accompanying ban on all mobile device use while driving.

FIGURE 2. TEXTING AND MOBILE DEVICE USE WHILE DRIVING LAWS BY STATE, 2014



Source: National Conference of State Legislatures. (2014).

Impact of Policies Enacted

Texting bans for all drivers coupled with primary enforcement reduced death rates.

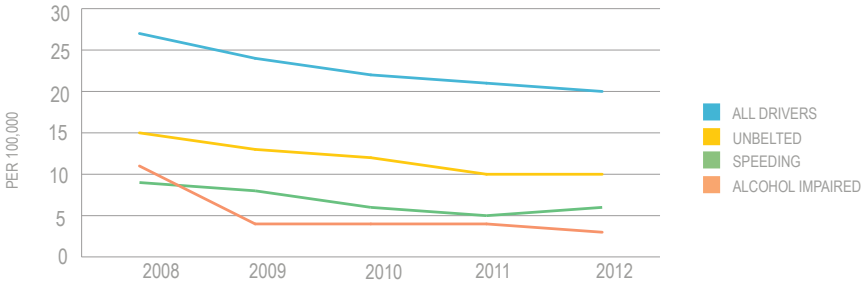
Examining the impact of distracted driver laws enacted by the states, the University of Alabama researchers recently found that states where texting is banned for all drivers and with primary law enforcement provisions reduced motor vehicle death rates significantly– an average of 3 percent per year. However, secondary enforcement bans or bans for selected drivers did not have a significant impact on state crash-related death rates. Applying the findings to Mississippi, a primary enforced ban on texting for all drivers from 2008 to 2012 could have lowered the death count by an estimated 95 lives.

-34%

After passage of a seat belt law with primary enforcement in 2006, crash death rates for the unbelted declined in Mississippi by 34 percent from 2008 to 2012.

Although the state's overall crash death rate remains high, recent decreases in certain types of crash death rates in Mississippi reflect the coordinated efforts of policy enactment and law enforcement targeting specific traffic safety risks (Figure 3). After passage of a seat belt law with primary enforcement in 2006, Mississippi showed steady declines in death rates for the unbelted– 34% lower from 2008 to 2012. Motor vehicle death rates also fell for traffic safety risks receiving similarly focused supports, including speeding and alcohol-related driving deaths.

FIGURE 3. TRENDS IN MOTOR VEHICLE DEATH RATES BY CATEGORY IN MISSISSIPPI, 2008-2012



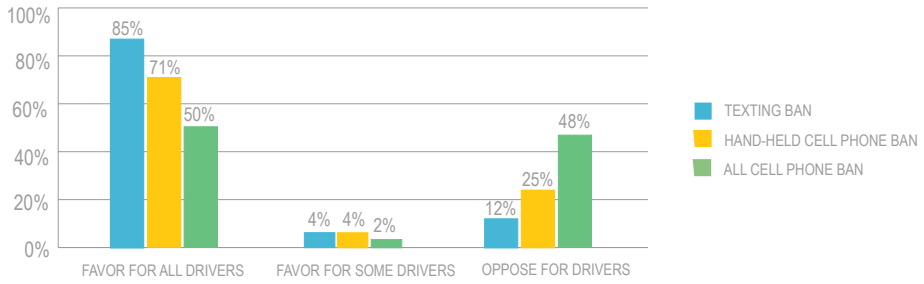
Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2013). United States Department of Transportation.

Mississippi Opinions

Most Mississippians support laws banning distracted driving and few oppose such bans.

When surveyed in 2010, most Mississippi adults expressed support for distracted driver bans while few opposed such bans (Figure 4). The highest support (85%) expressed was for laws that ban texting for all drivers. Seven out of ten support a ban on hand-held cell phone use for all drivers, and about one-half support a ban on all hand-held and hands-free devices for all drivers.

FIGURE 4. ADULT OPINIONS ABOUT DISTRACTED DRIVING POLICIES IN MISSISSIPPI, 2010



Source: Cross, G. et al. (2010). Mississippi State University, Social Science Research Center.

Policy Considerations

Mobile cellular device use is a common distracted driving behavior associated with a hefty health and economic toll. Mississippi has enacted laws to restrict cell phone use by its youngest drivers and by bus drivers responsible for transporting youth. Most states have enacted texting while driving bans for all drivers, but vary in whether the bans call for primary or secondary enforcement.

Research suggests states that reduced motor vehicle crash deaths enacted the following types of distracted driving provisions:

- prohibit texting or hand-held device use by drivers of all ages, and
- authorize enforcement when texting is a primary traffic safety violation.

By contrast, states that enacted the following types of distracted driver policy provisions showed no significant impact on crash-related deaths:

- prohibit texting or hand-held device use for some drivers, or
- authorize enforcement when texting is a secondary traffic violation.

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