

DRAFT: NHTSA CELL PHONE POLICY

The wireless communications industry has grown at an extraordinary rate in recent years. There are currently more than 170 million cell phone subscribers – more than half of the U.S. population. According to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration survey, 6% of daylight driving time – up from 4% in 2000 - involves talking on the phone.

However, NHTSA's position is that the primary responsibility of the driver has always been to operate a motor vehicle safely. It is a task that requires full attention and focus. Statistics show that all distractions, whether associated with the use of technology or not, can increase the risk of a crash.

NHTSA estimates that driver distraction contributes to about 25 percent of all police-reported traffic crashes. Though all distractions are a concern, we have seen the growth of a particular distraction, namely cell phone use while driving. While the precise impact cannot be quantified, we nevertheless have concluded that the use of cell phones while driving has contributed to an increasing number of crashes, injuries and fatalities.

A significant body of research worldwide indicates that both hand-held and hands-free cell phones increase the risk of a crash. Indeed, research has demonstrated that there is little, if any, difference between the use of hand-held and hands-free phones in contributing to the risk of a crash while driving distracted. Hands-free or hand-held, we have found that the cognitive distraction is significant enough to degrade a drivers' performance.

We recommend that drivers not use these devices when driving, except in an emergency. Moreover, we are convinced that legislation forbidding the use of handheld cell phones while driving may not be effective in improving highway safety since it will not address the problem. In fact, such legislation may erroneously imply that hands-free phones are safe to use while driving.