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WRONG WAY California's ban on operating a handheld phone while driving includes using maps. Put the phone in a secure mount.

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State bans help reduce driver distraction, our survey finds

LAWS PROHIBITING the use of a handheld cell phone or texting while driving in many states are making an impact. That's one of the findings in our latest nationally representative survey of adult drivers conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. But that news comes even as the number of deaths related to distracted driving is edging up.

In our survey of 1,003 people, conducted in December, 71 percent of respondents said they'd stopped or reduced texting, using a handheld phone, or operating a smart phone while driving in the previous year. More than half of that group indicated that they did so because of state laws; that's up from 44 percent in a similar survey we conducted two years ago.

Moreover, 56 percent of respondents who live in states with a full texting ban said they reduced or stopped such behavior because of that law or one banning handheld phone use. That compares with only 34 percent in states with no ban or one that affects only some drivers.

But our survey also found that many drivers are unsure of their own state laws. A quarter of respondents didn't know whether their state had a ban on either activity, and 23 percent claimed the state had a texting law when it didn't.

An epidemic on the road

Fatal crashes caused by distraction rose to 3,331 in 2011 from 3,267 in 2010, even as overall deaths dropped during that time. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 387,000 people were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver in 2011. And at any moment during daylight hours, about 660,000—5 percent of U.S. drivers—are using cell phones or other electronic devices.

Final statistics aren't yet available for

2012, but according to NHTSA, fatality estimates for the first nine months show a 7 percent increase—the largest jump since 1975. Data from the Governors Highway Safety Association also show a 19 percent jump for 16- and 17-year-old drivers in the first six months of 2012.

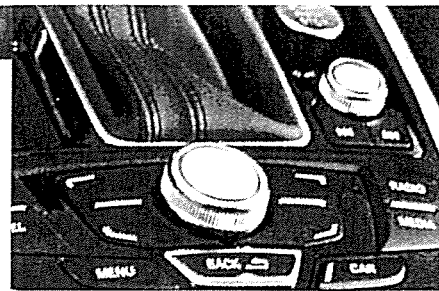
It's not clear how much distracted driving has played a role in that increase, but, "We know that cell-phone use in crashes is underreported," says Barbara Harsha, executive director of the GHSA. "It's really

Built-in distractions

Even if you don't use a handheld device while driving, you might not be able to avoid distracting technology. Many vehicles now come with sophisticated control systems that incorporate audio, communication, climate, and other functions, but some are overly complex and complicated to use.

The systems often use a touch screen or multifunction controller that requires more attention to operate than do the traditional buttons and knobs, and that was reflected in our survey responses.

Seventeen percent of respondents own a car with a multifunction controller, and 9 percent have a touch screen. About half of each of those groups said they found performing common tasks, such as adjusting



ERGONOMIC OVERLOAD Many respondents found multifunction controllers difficult to use.

the radio and cabin temperature, somewhat or very distracting.

The federal government is working on guidelines to help automakers develop in-car electronic devices that don't distract a driver or sacrifice safety.

difficult to get distraction data. If the crash is a survivable one, people generally are not honest about whether they've been using a cell phone."

Overall, phone use behind the wheel is growing, as reflected in a recent AT&T poll, in which 49 percent of commuters admitted they text while driving, with six in 10 saying they never did so three years ago. That percentage even exceeded the 43 percent for teens. The problem of distracted adults was also reflected in our 2011 survey of young drivers, in which 48 percent said they had witnessed their parents talking on a handheld phone in the previous 30 days, and 15 percent saw them texting.

Sending or reading a text takes your eyes off the road for 4.6 seconds, according to

NHTSA; at 55 mph that's the equivalent of driving the length of a football field with your eyes closed.

A positive sign in our survey, though, is that people are speaking up. Four in 10 respondents said they had at some point asked a driver to stop using a phone because they were concerned for their safety.

A tech problem or not?

Some people think that because distracted driving is a problem created by technology, the solution must be technological. That's the viewpoint of Jeffrey H. Coben, M.D., and Motao Zhu, M.D., Ph.D., of the West Virginia University School of Medicine. In a recent article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, they argue

that the best solution to help prevent more deaths is to have vehicle and/or cell-phone manufacturers render a handheld device inoperable whenever it's in a moving car.

"The interventions we have tried to implement to this point have been education and legislation, and our history suggests those interventions are not going to be sufficient," Coben says. Citing air bags as an example, he adds, "Technological innovations or engineering design principles actually build safety into the environment, and people don't need to do anything in order to be protected."

Bryan Reimer, a research scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab, disagrees. "Combating technology with technology is never going to work," he says. "If we can create a way of combating it here today in the U.S., someone in China tonight or tomorrow morning before I wake up will find a way around that."

Reimer thinks the problem goes deeper. In a recent study of the general behavior of people who report frequent phone use while driving, he found that those drivers show a pattern of risky behavior, such as speeding and frequent passing and lane changes. "Regardless of the technology, people who are willing to pick it up more frequently are a higher-risk group of drivers to start with," Reimer says. "How do we begin to functionally look at the behavioral problem we have on the roadway as opposed to the technology problem?"

Some answers could come from the Strategic Highway Research Program, which is conducting the largest and most comprehensive driving study yet performed. In the program—administered by the Transportation Research Board, a nonprofit institution that provides research for the government and scientific communities—2,800 drivers have been recruited for observation of their behaviors behind the wheel. When the study is completed in 2014, the data will cover more than 33 million miles and document how people drive and what they are doing before a crash. After analysis, highway agencies will be able to develop countermeasures to improve driver safety and reduce inattention.

What's being done

It's currently illegal to text while driving in 39 states and Washington, D.C., and to use a handheld phone in 10 states and D.C. Many in our survey said they'd support more laws. More than 90 percent of respondents said they support laws banning

Tech aids can reduce distraction

A growing number of smart-phone apps and other aids are designed to reduce drivers' cell-phone use. Here's a sampling:

Hands-free aids. Many cars now come with a Bluetooth system built in, so you can wirelessly connect your phone to the car's audio system. Alternatives include a Bluetooth headset or an aftermarket device (see "Affordable Hands-Free Calling," May 2013).

PROS They handle incoming calls easily with the press of a button or a voice command, and some systems read messages aloud and let drivers speak responses.

CONS Initiating outgoing calls can be distracting, especially if the device doesn't recognize your command. Some devices have phone-compatibility problems.

Smart-phone apps. They restrict the phone from being used when the app is switched on or when the vehicle is in motion (as detected through the phone's GPS receiver or Bluetooth). They're available from major cell-phone carriers, such as AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and Verizon, as well as from independent providers, such as iZup and tXtBlocker.

PROS All of the apps we've tried can call 911, and some are free. Some automatically activate when the car is in motion and, depending on the app, can send automatic replies to incoming texts, e-mail messages, or calls. And some can notify parents if the app is deactivated.

CONS Monthly costs of \$2 to \$10 can add up, and use of the phone's GPS can drain the phone's battery. Apps can't tell when a passenger is using the phone instead of the driver, they can be manually turned off, and some don't work with the iPhone.

Devices connected to the vehicle's diagnostic port. They plug into a connector under the dash and restrict phone use in a way similar to apps.

PROS They can send an auto-reply to calls and texts, they don't drain the phone's battery, and they're tamperproof because parents set a code to unlock them.

CONS They can be pricey, ranging from about \$90 to \$180, plus extra costs for accessories. Each works with only one car, and they aren't compatible with the iPhone.

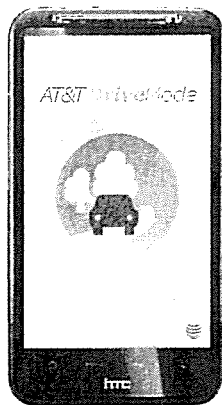
Monitoring systems.

They track a driver's behavior and speed with cameras, special phones, and other systems.

PROS They activate when the vehicle is in motion. All collected information is logged, and some systems allow real-time online

tracking. Data reports are available to parents and companies that subscribe.

CONS Some systems require you to buy a particular phone and pay a monthly fee of about \$10. The phones can lose battery power quickly because the GPS is constantly on, and those with cameras and sensors can be used in only one vehicle.



PHONE BLOCKERS
Apps such as AT&T's DriveMode stop incoming texts and calls and send an automatic reply.

texting while driving; 60 percent support bans on talking on a handheld phone.

Activists are working to get laws passed in the remaining states, but it can be an uphill battle. Bonnie Raffaele's 17-year-old daughter, Kelsey, died in 2010 after she crashed while talking on a handheld cell phone. Raffaele, of Sault St. Marie, Mich., fought to get a law passed in her state that might help save other teens' lives. Raffaele said she initially faced resistance, with the state's speaker of the house telling her it was a "common-sense law, and they didn't need to legislate common sense." But her efforts have paid off. Kelsey's Law, which makes it illegal for 16- and 17-year-old drivers to use a cell phone, went into effect March 28. But it's still legal for adults.

Other states are resisting because legislators say the bans infringe on personal freedom and because research on their effectiveness is mixed. In 2010 the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety assessed several states with handheld and texting bans and found that accidents had not declined after they were passed. In certain states, in fact, insurance claims increased. Some of that is attributed to drivers moving the phone down to their lap to avoid being seen by police. That exacerbates the problem because it results in a person's eyes being off of the road for a longer time.

NHTSA-sponsored studies have shown that increased enforcement of the laws is a key to their success. In 2011 NHTSA worked with police departments in Hartford, Conn., and Syracuse, N.Y., to conduct several waves of high-visibility enforcement, modeled after the successful "Click It or Ticket" safety-belt and "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" drunk-driving campaigns. After completing four waves in each location, the police found that their "Phone in One Hand, Ticket in the Other" campaigns had resulted in a 57 percent drop in drivers talking on a handheld phone and a 72 percent decline in texting in Hartford. Syracuse saw a 32 percent drop in both behaviors.

Larger-scale programs are being conducted in Delaware and in Sacramento, Calif. In addition to stepped-up police enforcement, radio and TV ads and digital road signs alert drivers to the dangers. How effective the campaigns are in reducing distracting behavior will be analyzed after the programs conclude in June.

"I do think the message is getting out," says Jana Simpler, director of the Delaware Office of Highway Safety. "I think it takes



Many drivers are unsure about distracted-driving laws in their state.

time; you're not going to change driver behavior overnight."

NHTSA has also awarded Connecticut and Massachusetts grants to help them plan and conduct high-visibility anti-texting enforcement programs. The money will be used to train police to spot texting offenders (who are more difficult to detect) and to work on effective media campaigns.

To fight the problem, Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, believes a coordinated effort is needed, with strong laws, strict enforcement, driver education, and technology solutions.

According to our survey, simply getting the word out was a big influence on people who said they stopped or reduced such behavior. Sixty-four percent of those

respondents said they were influenced by reading or hearing about the dangers of distracted driving, and 33 percent said they were influenced by media campaigns.

Drivers can also help the cause by being responsible and taking action:

Put down the device. Use a handheld cell phone or other personal electronic device only when the car is stopped.

Don't enable. If you know someone is driving, don't call or text. As a passenger, speak up if a driver picks up a device to use.

Educate yourself. Learn the rules in your state (go to iilhs.org), but impose your own restrictions even if a law isn't in place.

Be heard. To help pass or strengthen laws in your state, call your legislators to voice your concerns. Cite examples of dangerous behaviors you've seen on the road. Raffaele bombarded state officials with calls and postcards every day.

Lead by example. Kids mimic their parents' behavior, so if you are using the phone or texting while driving, they will think it's OK to do the same.

Go hands-free. If you must talk on a phone while driving, keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel. Hands-free conversations are less distracting than trying to juggle a phone and focus on driving at the same time.

BY THE NUMBERS

Our survey found widespread use of cell phones behind the wheel, despite most people saying it's dangerous.

What they saw in the previous 30 days:

91%

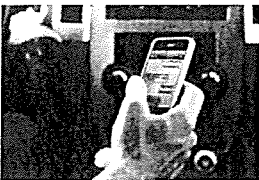
saw a driver talking on a handheld phone.

62%

saw a driver texting.

22%

saw a driver using hands to operate a smart-phone app.



What they did:

43%

had a conversation on a handheld phone.

33%

of smart-phone owners used their hands to operate an app.

18%

of smart-phone owners accessed e-mail or social media.

14%

texted.



What they say:

91%

said texting is very dangerous.

51%

said using a handheld cell phone is very dangerous.