



# MOBILE PHONE USE: A GROWING PROBLEM OF DRIVER DISTRACTION



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# Executive summary

**D**river distraction is an important risk factor for road traffic injuries. There are different types of driver distraction, usually divided into those where the source of distraction is internal to the vehicle – such as tuning a radio, or using a mobile phone, and those external to the vehicle – such as looking at billboards or watching people on the side of the road. This document focuses on the use of mobile phones while driving, in response to concern among policy-makers that this potential risk to road safety is increasing rapidly as a result of the exponential growth in the use of mobile phones more generally in society. It aims to raise awareness about the risks of distracted driving associated with mobile phone use, and to present countermeasures that are being used around the world to tackle this growing problem.

Studies from a number of countries suggest that the proportion of drivers using mobile phones while driving has increased over the past 5–10 years, ranging from 1% to up to 11%. The use of hands-free mobile phones is likely to be higher, but this figure is more difficult to ascertain. In many countries the extent of this problem remains unknown, as data on mobile phone use is not routinely collected when a crash occurs.

Using mobile phones can cause drivers to take their eyes off the road, their hands off the steering wheel, and their minds off the road and the surrounding situation. It is this type of distraction – known as cognitive distraction – which appears to have the biggest impact on driving behaviour. There is a growing body of evidence that shows that the distraction caused by mobile phones can impair performance in a number of ways, e.g. longer reaction times (notably braking reaction time, but also reaction to traffic signals), impaired ability to keep in the correct lane, shorter following distances, and an overall reduction in awareness of the driving situation. Using a mobile phone for text messaging while driving seems to have a particularly detrimental impact on driving behaviour. Text messaging is often a low-cost form of communication, and the increasing use of text messaging services among drivers is likely to make this an important road safety concern. Young drivers are more likely to be using a mobile phone while driving than older drivers, and are particularly vulnerable to the effects of distraction given their relative inexperience behind the wheel.

The impact of using a mobile phone on crash risk is difficult to ascertain, but studies suggest that drivers using a mobile phone are approximately four times more likely to be involved in a crash. This increased risk appears to be similar for both hand-held and hands-free phones, suggesting that it is the cognitive

distraction that results from being involved in a conversation on a mobile phone that has the most impact upon driving behaviour, and thus crash risk.

While the body of research looking at the risk associated with using a mobile phone while driving is growing rapidly, there is much less known about the effectiveness of interventions to address this issue. As a result, a number of countries are following approaches that has been known to be successful in addressing other key risk factors for road traffic injuries, such as in increasing seat-belt use, or reducing speed and drink-driving.

This includes:

- collecting data to assess the magnitude of the problem and identify where and among whom it is most prevalent;
- adopting and enforcing legislation relating to mobile phone use;
- supporting this legislation with strong enforcement and public awareness campaigns to emphasize the risk of the behaviour and the penalties associated with transgression of the law.

Other measures that offer potential reduction in risk include:

- technological solutions, for example, applications that detect when the phone is in a moving car and direct in-coming calls to a voice messaging service;
- company policies that regulate employees' use of mobile phones while driving.

Nonetheless, to date the effectiveness of any of these measures on mobile phone use while driving – and more importantly, on crashes and injuries – has yet to be adequately documented. While there is some research on the effectiveness of legislation on the use of mobile phones, the ability to sustain reduced levels of mobile phone use needs to be assessed. In addition, the possibility that laws banning only hand-held mobile phones may actually increase the use of hands-free sets phones needs to be evaluated, particularly as based on the available evidence, using a hands-free phone while driving appears to have a similar risk to using a hand-held one.

Although the evidence around mobile phones as a risk factor for road traffic injuries is in its infancy compared to other aspects of road safety, this issue is likely to become a growing concern globally. Furthermore, while this report focuses on mobile phone use, it is important to recognize that mobile phone services are increasingly integrated with other applications (e.g. e-mail and Internet access via "smart phones"), and that information on the risks of such devices for road traffic crashes, as well as on potential countermeasures, is therefore likely to evolve alongside the rapid technological changes taking place in this area. Governments need to be proactive now, and put in place measures to address mobile phone use among drivers, while simultaneously monitoring and evaluating the effects of these interventions. In this way the body of evidence in this area will grow, allowing future policy decisions to be grounded firmly in science.

# Introduction

A stylized illustration in a light yellow color. On the right is a car, and on the left is a mobile phone with a pair of earbuds plugged into it. The background is a solid yellow color.

Every year nearly 1.3 million people die and 50 million are injured as a result of road traffic crashes (1). These deaths and injuries have an immeasurable impact on families and communities as they tragically and irrevocably change people's lives. In addition to the huge emotional toll these injuries exact, they also cause considerable economic loss to casualties, their families and nations as a whole.

Road traffic injuries affect all age groups, but their impact is particularly striking among the young – they are the leading cause of death worldwide among those aged 15–29 years (2). Trends suggest that between now and 2030, road traffic injuries will rise from being the ninth leading cause of death globally to become the fifth. This rise is particularly driven by the dramatic increase in motorization in a number of low- and middle-income countries – an increase that now demands improved road safety strategies and land-use planning.

A number of factors have been identified as affecting the likelihood of a road traffic injury, and limiting the exposure to these risk factors is critical to the success of efforts to reduce road traffic injuries. For example, there is now a large body of scientific research showing the increased risk of road traffic

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