

Kentucky, Indiana ponder teen-driver cell-phone laws

By Lesley Stedman Weidenbener

lstedman@courier-journal.com

INDIANAPOLIS – Floyd Central (Ind.) High School senior Mitch Moutoux remembers the text message telling him a girl he knew was pregnant. It came as he was driving his maroon Chevy Silverado, but he looked down to read it anyway -- and acknowledges now that cell phones "can be distracting."

"My buddy grabbed the wheel for me," said Mitch, of Georgetown, Ind., recalling that text. "It was a pretty surprising message."

Mitch, who just turned 18, is not alone among teens who say they regularly use their cell phones while on the road.

Last year, a survey by AAA and Seventeen magazine reported that nearly a third of 16- and 17-year olds admit talking on the phone while driving. Nearly one in four acknowledge texting.

A study released this year by the Erie Insurance Co. found evidence the numbers are even higher. Teens said more than half their friends sent text messages while driving and more than three-quarters talked on the phone.

It's a practice some Kentucky and Indiana lawmakers want to stop.

In Indiana, Sen. Travis Holdman, R-Markle, plans to introduce a bill next year that would strengthen the state's graduated driver's license law and add a section prohibiting cell-phone use by minors while driving.

In Kentucky, Rep. Rick Nelson, D-Middlesboro, has prefiled legislation that would ban anyone younger than 18 from using cell phones and other communications devices while driving.

Nelson acknowledges that cell-phone use is distracting for drivers of all ages but said he's limiting his proposal to teens.

"There's probably not a person who needs to drive and talk on their cell phones -- even though you and I probably do," Nelson said. "But for the teenagers, they're at a stage of their driving career where they're not as experienced. So maybe we can save some teenage lives and stop some accidents."

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading killer of young people, claiming more than 6,000 15- to 20-year-olds each year, according to AAA. Many of those crashes are caused by inattention and distractions, including cell-phone use, officials say.

Seventeen states prohibit young drivers from calling and texting while they're on the road, even if they're using a hands-free device such as Bluetooth. In some states, the law refers to probationary drivers only. In others, it applies to anyone younger than 18.

Five other states plus the District of Columbia ban all drivers from using hand-held phones, a proposal that has failed in both Kentucky and Indiana.

Indiana Rep. Peggy Welch, D-Bloomington, said she would support a broader ban and thinks her constituents would, too.

"I have my booth at the county fair, and one of the major issues I hear every year is people asking, 'When are you going to ban the use of cell phones for driving?' " Welch said. "People have very strong feelings about it."

But lawmakers have a tough time restricting the actions of adults, she said.

"So, you start somewhere. And if this is where we need to start, we will," said Welch, who hopes to be a co-sponsor of Holdman's bill if it passes the Senate. "There's lots of anecdotal stories that if someone's distracted they don't drive as well."

It's a particular problem for teens, said Sherry Deane, public affairs director for the AAA Hoosier Motor Club.

"Kids have the highest crash rates," she said. "They're the most inexperienced drivers who need to be focused completely on their driving."

Deane cited a University of Utah study from 2003 that shows driving while using a cell phone -- even with a hands-free device -- is essentially driving "blind." Drivers are looking at the road, but they don't really see it, she said.

Research shows that cell-phone use increases a driver's risk of crashing fourfold. Carnegie Mellon University scientists released a study this year that found listening on a cell phone alone reduces by 37 percent the amount of brain activity dedicated to driving.

DuPont Manual High School senior Daniel Ensign, 17, said he doesn't believe talking on the phone hinders his driving abilities, though he sends text messages only when stopped at lights.

"I'm a good multitasker," said Daniel, who lives in Louisville. "I think I'm a pretty good driver."

But uncertain he can say the same for everyone, Daniel said he might support a ban on cell-phone use by drivers of all ages. He said he knows one teen who totaled a car while texting and driving. And he's seen other people talking on phones who aren't paying attention to the road.

"I think it could increase safety," he said. "But I think it would be very hard for the police to enforce."

Some studies have shown enforcement to be a problem. In particular, a University of North Carolina study this year for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found a North Carolina law banning cell-phone use by minor drivers had not significantly changed teen behaviors.

It found that most parents didn't even know about the law and that a majority of parents and teens thought it wasn't being enforced well.

But Mitch, the high schooler from Georgetown, said a ban would have made him think twice about using his phone before he turned 18, even though he thinks he's pretty good at sending texts without looking at the phone in his lap.

"A ticket is a ticket, and I've had my fair share of those," said Mitch, who estimates he's using his phone 70 percent of the time he's driving. "I definitely would not take a call."