

Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (US), Associated Press.

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A recent study suggests teen drivers in the US are mostly ignoring laws banning the use of cell phones while driving, in states where they exist. Several states in the US have passed laws in recent years to restrict teenagers using their cell phones while driving.

The study was conducted in the state of North Carolina by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, and found that introducing a law banning the use of cell phones while driving had no effect, in fact the researchers observed slightly more teenagers appeared to be using them after the ban than before.

The North Carolina law, which is part of the state's graduated licensing system, was brought into force in 2006, and fines anyone under 18 who is found using a cell phone while driving.

More and more states in the US are restricting cell phone use by young drivers amid growing concerns about the potential of this behavior to contribute to rising crash risk in this age group.

17 states and the District of Columbia restrict both hand-held and hands-free phones by young drivers, while 6 states and Washington DC ban all drivers from using hand-helds.

According to the US government's auto safety agency, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among teenagers, and crash statistics show teenage drivers are three times more likely to have a fatal crash than all other drivers, reported the Associated Press recently.

For this study, researchers observed young drivers leaving high school, and found that cell phone use by teenagers in North Carolina before and after the law enforcement date was about the same as in South Carolina for the same two periods, where no such law has been introduced.

The Institute also conducted a separate telephone survey of parents and teenagers and found strong widespread support for the new restrictions. But the survey also revealed that the majority of parents and teenagers alike believed the ban on hand-held and hands-free phone use was not being enforced.

The researchers started observing drivers a few weeks before the new law was brought into force in December 2006. They observed that 11 per cent of teenage drivers were using cell phones as they left school in the afternoon. About 5 months after the law was brought in, nearly 12 per cent were seen using their cell phones at the same time of day.

Most of the teenagers seen using their cell phones were using handholds; 9 per cent were holding them to their ears, and less than 1 per cent were using hands-free sets. About 2 per cent were seen dialling calls or texting.

At comparison sites in South Carolina, where teen use of cell phones while driving is not restricted, the researchers observed that cell phone use was unchanged over both time frames, and remained at a steady 13 per cent.

Senior vice president for research at the Institute, and an author of the study, Anne McCartt, said:

"Most young drivers comply with graduated licensing restrictions such as limits on nighttime driving and passengers, even when enforcement is low."

"The hope in North Carolina was that the same would hold true for cell phone use, but this wasn't the case," she added.

"Teen drivers' cell phone use actually increased a little," explained McCartt, who said parents played a key role in compliance with the rules of graduated licensing, but, as she pointed out:

"Limiting phone use may be tougher for them since many want their teens to carry phones."

The survey that asked parents and teenagers by phone about the ban, showed that teenage drivers were more likely than parents to say they knew about it: only 39 per cent of parents said they were aware of the new law compared with 64 per cent of teenage drivers.

However, there was more support for the ban among parents (95 per cent) than among teenagers (74 per cent), and 88 per cent of parents say they restricted their youngsters' cell phone use while only 66 per cent of teenagers said that their parents did so.

About 50 per cent of the teenagers who had driven on the day before they were surveyed on the phone admitted they had used their phone while driving (this was after the ban was brought in).

Most of the parents and the teenagers surveyed by phone said that police officers weren't looking for people breaking the cell phone law. 71 per cent of the teenagers and 60 per cent of the parents said that enforcement was rare or non-existent, while only 22 per cent of teenagers and 13 per cent of parents said they thought the law was being enforced either a lot or fairly often.

McCartt said it's difficult to enforce cell phone bans for teenage drivers:

"Drivers with phones to their ears aren't hard to spot, but it's nearly impossible for police officers to see hands-free devices or correctly guess how old drivers are."

"Cell phone bans for teenage drivers aren't effective, based on what we saw in North Carolina," concluded McCartt.

A transport analyst told the Associate Press yesterday that it was difficult to assess the impact of bans on cell phone use while driving because many of the laws are new.