

ARTICLE

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Does Outlawing Handheld Cell Phone Use While Driving Reduce Accidents?



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The Highway Loss Data Institute (HLDI) sent shockwaves through legislatures and the media late last month when it released the results of a study which claimed that outlawing hand-held cell phone use while driving has not led to a reduction in the frequency of motor vehicle accidents. Adrian Lund, the president of the HLDI, noted that the “new findings don’t match what we already know about the risk of phoning and texting while driving.” The study combined with Lund’s admission that the HLDI “knows” and acknowledges the accident risks created by distracted driving have left many wondering what the next step should be in preventing and analyzing these risks.

The Puzzling Study

The Highway Loss Data Institute is an affiliate organization funded by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. It compared the insurance claims arising in New York, California, Washington D.C. and Connecticut before and after the states imposed bans on hand-held cell phone use while driving. (Oregon and New Jersey have also prohibited hand-held cell phone use while driving, but the data from these states was not examined by the HLDI.) The study further compared these findings to the statistics in nearby states during the same time period. The HLDI ultimately concluded that accident claim trends did not change before and after the bans were imposed, nor did the trends change in comparison with the nearby states that New York, California, Washington D.C. and Connecticut were balanced against.

Explanations?

The HLDI study found that hand-held cell phone use was down significantly in the areas where such use is prohibited, but the rate of accidents has not similarly decreased. Despite the findings however, the HLDI is not taking the position that distracted driving is no longer a problem. In fact, the HDLI is currently gathering data to understand other factors involved in the issue in order to understand why decreased hand-held cell phone use did not lead to a decrease in accidents.

The HLDI, lawmakers and the media have speculated as to what the explanation for such puzzling conclusions could be. Some ideas that have been widely discussed include:

- Using hands-free cell phones could place drivers at the same risk of distraction as hand-held phones
- Encouraging the use of hands-free technology has freed drivers to engage in other distracting behavior
- Enforcing the bans more strictly could lead to a greater reduction in accidents

Regardless of what the explanation turns out to be, there is a fairly broad consensus among researchers and lawmakers that there must be more to the story than the HLDI study has revealed. After all, the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis reports that nearly 3,000 fatalities and 12,000 serious injuries a year result from hand-held cell phone use while driving. Science Daily recently reported that nearly 80 percent of all motor vehicle accidents in the United States are caused by driver distraction.

One Study Among Many

Ultimately, the HLDI is just one study in a sea of conflicting data on the subject of distracted driving. The vast majority of studies concretely support the conclusion that distracted driving is almost unimaginably dangerous.

One such study, conducted primarily by a prominent professor and director of the simulation and optimization laboratory at the University of Illinois concluded that hand-held cell phone bans have a greater impact in densely populated urban areas than rural areas. The Illinois study examined accident data furnished by the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles. The primary difference between the two recent studies is that the HLDI relied primarily on data collected by the insurance industry, while the Illinois study analyzed publicly available data.

Researchers and lawmakers will continue to analyze data on distracted driving as the problem continues to contribute to the deaths of thousands of Americans a year. At this point, researchers and lawmakers largely agree that distracted driving is a serious problem, though exactly to what extent and what method will best remedy the problem has yet to be determined.

Contacting an Attorney

Navigating the judicial system can be a confusing and frustrating process. If you or someone you care about has been injured in an accident involving a distracted driver, it is important to [seek the advice of an experienced New Jersey personal injury attorney](#). A lawyer can answer your questions and explain your legal rights and options.