
Study quantifies drivers' cell-phone use

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By NEDRA PICKLER, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (July 23, 2001 12:37 p.m. EDT <http://www.nandotimes.com>) - At any given time, about 3 percent of drivers are talking on a hand-held cell phone while operating their vehicle, a government survey unveiled Monday says.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that at least 500,000 drivers are talking on their cell phones simultaneously during the daytime. Rates nearly doubled during non-rush hours.

Officials at the agency say this is the first such research report to quantify cell-phone use on American highways. NHTSA data collectors observed more than 12,000 vehicles at 640 intersections around the country last fall.

An industry group estimates that 119 million Americans use cell phones.

The survey does not cover "hand-free" phones that some drivers use and does not attempt to determine the phones' role in accidents. NHTSA estimates that some form of driver distraction - including talking, eating, reading or even changing radio stations - is involved in 20 percent to 30 percent of all crashes.

The survey had a margin of error of 1 percentage point.

Those driving vans and SUVs are most likely to use a cell phone while driving, while pickup truck drivers used them the least.

The highest use rate observed during the survey - 8 percent - was for drivers of vans and SUVs during nonrush hours.

Women use their cell phones more than men, 3.4 percent to 2.7 percent. And white drivers use cell phones 3.7 percent of the time, compared with 2.3 percent for black drivers and 1.7 percent for other races.

Rates are slightly higher in suburban areas than in rural areas, 3.4 percent to 3 percent.

New York became the first state to pass a ban on using cell phones while driving last month. At least a dozen localities and 23 foreign countries have established bans, and several other states are considering similar laws.

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