

FALL NEWSLETTER

Passenger Vehicle Driver Cell Phone Use Results from the Fall 2000 National Occupant Protection Use Survey by Dennis Utter

Background

Driver distraction as a cause of motor vehicle traffic crashes has become an increasingly important issue. A 1996 study published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that driver distraction in all its various forms probably contributes to between 20 and 30 percent of all crashes. In 1999, data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System revealed that driver distraction was a contributing factor in 11 percent of fatal crashes involving 4,462 fatalities. Additionally, the NASS General Estimates System estimated that various forms of driver distraction contributed to between 25 and 30 percent of injury and property-damage-only crashes.

Driver distraction and inattention can come from factors inside and outside of the vehicle. Observing passing scenery and/or persons outside of the vehicle can distract a driver from controlling the vehicle. Inside a vehicle a driver can be distracted by discussions with other vehicle occupants, eating or drinking, or attending to any of the numerous electronic devices found in the vehicle, primarily the radio or other sound system equipment. As more vehicles become equipped with other electronic devices such as navigational aids, the potential for driver distraction will increase.

Another source of potential driver distraction that has received much recent attention is the use of cell phones. The use of cell phones has been variously reported as contributing to the cause of a significant number of traffic crashes. Many states and localities have considered restricting cell phone use in moving vehicles within their jurisdictions. Even the use of cell phones with

the aid of “hands-free” devices can distract drivers, although the use of such equipment does permit the driver to keep both hands on the steering wheel.

The actual contribution of cell phone use as a contributing factor or cause of a motor vehicle crash is difficult to quantify. The mere presence of a cell phone in a vehicle does not indicate that it was in use just prior to a crash or that its use contributed to the cause of the crash. Also, because of potential liability issues, drivers who were using a cell phone prior to a crash are not likely to report that fact to an investigating police officer.

Quantifying the actual use of cell phones by motor vehicle drivers while they are driving is difficult. Anecdotally, most people can cite numerous instances where they were driving and observed someone using a cell phone and, often, driving slow or erratically. The 2000 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey, a telephone survey conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) from November 2000 to January 2001 and whose results will be published later this year, estimated that 54 percent of drivers “usually” have some type of wireless phone in their vehicle with them. Fifty-five percent of these drivers report that their phone is on during “all” or “most” of their trips and 73 percent reported using their phone while driving.

Findings

Nationally, overall **hand-held cell phone use** by drivers of passenger vehicles (Table 1) was estimated at 3 percent. This means that **at any given time during daylight hours, about 3**

percent of drivers of passenger cars, vans, SUVs, and pickups are actively using a cell phone. Assuming that the 200 million registered passenger vehicles are driven on public roads for an average of one hour during daylight hours, there are an average of about 16.7 million passenger vehicles on the roads during any given daylight hour; in turn, this translates into approximately one-half million drivers using cell phones at any given time. The 2000 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey

also estimated that 73 percent of drivers who said they usually have a wireless phone in their vehicle with them use a hand-held cell phone and an additional 22 percent use “hands-free” equipment. Extrapolating this result to the NOPUS hand-held cell phone observations results in an additional 0.9 percent of drivers using “hands-free” cell phones for a total of 3.9 percent (or more than 600,000) of drivers actively using cell phones at any one time.

Vehicle Type	Overall	Region			
		Northeast	Midwest	South	West
All Passenger Vehicles	3.0 (0.5)	2.9 (1.2)	3.5 (1.1)	3.5 (0.9)	2.2 (0.7)
Passenger Cars	2.6 (0.5)	3.0 (1.0)	2.2 (0.8)	3.2 (1.0)	2.0 (0.9)
Vans and SUVs	4.8 (1.0)	2.9 (2.2)	5.9 (2.5)	6.6 (2.1)	3.0 (1.4)
Pickups	1.9 (0.6)	0.6 (0.6)	3.6 (2.7)	1.2 (0.6)	2.3 (1.2)

Vehicle Type	Overall	Day-of-Week		Time-of-Day	
		Weekday ¹	Weekend	Rush Hour ²	Non-Rush Hour
All Passenger Vehicles	3.0 (0.5)	3.2 (0.6)	2.2 (0.4)	2.4 (0.5)	4.7 (0.9)
Passenger Car	2.6 (0.5)	2.8 (0.6)	2.0 (0.8)	2.1 (0.5)	4.0 (0.9)
Vans and SUVs	4.8 (1.0)	5.8 (1.5)	1.3 (0.7)	4.7 (1.5)	8.0 (2.5)
Pickups	1.9 (0.6)	1.7 (0.6)	2.8 (1.9)	1.1 (0.5)	2.8 (1.6)

¹Weekday is defined as Monday - Friday

²Rush Hour is defined as the hours from 8 a.m. - 9:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. - 6 p.m. on Weekdays.

Table 1 also shows that the highest National use rates were observed for drivers of vans and sport utility vehicles (SUVs). Drivers of vans and SUVs also had the highest use rates in the Midwest, South and West. In the Northeast, use rates for passenger car drivers and for drivers of vans and SUVs were essentially the same (3.0 percent and 2.9 percent, respectively). The lowest overall National use rate was observed for drivers of pickup trucks. However, pickup truck driver use was higher than passenger car driver use in the Midwest and West. Cell phone use by drivers was higher on

weekdays than on weekends (Table 2). On weekends, the use rate for drivers of pickups exceeded the use rates for drivers of passenger cars and drivers of vans and SUVs. On weekdays, use rates by drivers of vans and SUVs was higher than that of drivers of other vehicles. The highest use rate observed during this survey (8 percent) was by drivers of vans and SUVs during non-rush hours. Use rates by drivers of all types of vehicles were almost twice as high during non-rush hours as during rush hours.

From Table 3, it can be seen that overall cell phone use rates were slightly higher in suburban areas than in rural areas (3.4 percent compared to 3 percent). Again, use rates by drivers of vans and SUVs were the highest in all

areas. Also, use rates by drivers of pickups continued to be lower than for other vehicles, except in rural areas. In rural areas they were higher than the use rate of passenger car drivers (3.2 percent compared to 1.9 percent).

Table 3 Observed Driver Cell Phone Use Rates by Vehicle Type and Type of Area NATIONAL OCCUPANT PROTECTION USE SURVEY Controlled Intersection Study, Fall 2000 (Estimates and Sampling Errors in Percentages)				
Vehicle Type	Overall	Type of Area		
		Urban	Suburban	Rural
All Passenger Vehicles	3.0 (0.5)	2.4 (0.7)	3.4 (0.8)	3.0 (0.8)
Passenger Car	2.6 (0.5)	2.5 (0.8)	3.0 (0.7)	1.9 (0.9)
Vans and SUVs	4.8 (1.0)	2.8 (1.3)	5.6 (1.7)	7.1 (2.4)
Pickups	1.9 (0.6)	1.9 (1.4)	1.0 (0.4)	3.2 (1.5)

Table 4 Observed Driver Cell Phone Use Rates by Vehicle Type and Driver Characteristics (Sex, Age, Race) NATIONAL OCCUPANT PROTECTION USE SURVEY Controlled Intersection Study, Fall 2000 (Estimates and Sampling Errors in Percentages)								
Vehicle Type	Driver Characteristics							
	Sex		Age Group ¹			Race		
	Male	Female	Young Adult	Adult	Senior	White	Black	Other
All Passenger Vehicles	2.7 (0.5)	3.4 (0.6)	3.1 (0.8)	3.2 (0.5)	1.4 (0.4)	3.7 (0.8)	2.3 (0.9)	1.7 (0.7)
Passenger Car	2.5 (1.0)	2.8 (0.6)	2.8 (0.8)	2.8 (0.6)	1.2 (0.5)	3.7 (0.9)	1.3 (0.7)	1.2 (0.7)
Vans and SUVs	3.2 (0.8)	6.1 (1.7)	5.7 (2.6)	5.1 (1.2)	4.6 (3.2)	5.4 (1.1)	3.7 (2.2)	3.0 (2.9)
Pickups	2.5 (0.8)	1.0 (0.4)	1.0 (0.7)	3.0 (1.1)	0.7 (0.5)	1.8 (0.6)	0.5 (0.6)	9.8 (6.7)

¹Age Groups are defined to include these approximate Ages: Young Adult - Ages 16-24; Adult - Ages 24 - 69; and, Senior - Ages 70 and over

Table 4 shows some differences in use rates by driver characteristics. Female drivers were observed using a cell phone more frequently than male drivers. This was especially true for female drivers of vans and SUVs, where use rates were almost twice as high as male drivers (6.1 percent compared to 3.2 percent). There was little difference in cell phone use by drivers in the Young Adult or Adult age groups. However, use by Seniors was much less. Finally, use by drivers classified as "White" was higher than use by Black drivers or drivers of other races (3.7 percent compared to 2.3 and 1.7 percent, respectively).

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