

Laws designed to ban or curb drivers' use of cell phones are saving motorcyclists' lives

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Laws to ban or curb drivers' use of cell phones and other handheld devices have greatly reduced the rate of fatalities for motorcyclists, according to a new study by faculty at Florida Atlantic University and the University of Miami.

The study's findings, recently published in *Social Science & Medicine*, show that states with moderate to strong bans have motorcycle fatality rates that differ by as much as 11 percent compared to states with no bans.

"In the case of motorcycles, these laws seem to be effective," said study co-author Gulcin Gumus, Ph.D., an associate professor in health administration in the Department of Management Programs at FAU's College of Business. "While it's not clear that these laws have had an impact on reducing the overall number of traffic fatalities, when we focus specifically on motorcycles, we find that these laws are having a major impact in reducing deaths among motorcycle riders. "

Motorcyclists account for a much higher proportion of traffic fatalities relative to the share of motorcycles among all motor vehicles and vehicle miles driven in the U.S. The study's authors obtained annual data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System on total and motorcycle-specific traffic fatalities for all 50 states during the period of 2005-2015. Those data were then merged with state-specific characteristics, texting/handheld device laws, as well as other traffic policies to estimate the effectiveness of strong, moderate and weak bans compared to no bans.

While automobile safety has greatly improved over the last several decades, bringing the overall fatality rates down with it, motorcycle fatality rates have not declined. Although research is mixed on the effectiveness of texting/handheld bans for overall traffic fatalities, the study's findings indicate that motorcyclists are at elevated risk of being a victim of distracted driving and thus could greatly benefit from these policies. This result is driven mainly by multiple-vehicle crashes (e.g., car hitting motorcycle) as opposed to single-vehicle crashes.

"Every day about nine Americans are killed and more than 1,000 are injured in traffic crashes that involve distracted drivers," said study co-author Michael T. French, professor of health economics in the Miami Business School's Department of Health Management and Policy and an avid motorcycle rider. "While our initial goal was to understand whether these laws save lives on the road, the broader application of our findings is even more powerful."

The researchers argue policy makers should consider strengthening texting/handheld bans along with their enforcement to improve safety and save lives, especially among motorcyclists.?

"We have a better appreciation for the range of policies across states and years, and what makes texting/handheld bans strong and effective, especially for motorcyclists," French said. "Hopefully these results will facilitate a more informed discussion between legislators, law enforcement officers, and the general public about distracted driving and traffic safety."

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