

State Laws to Curb Drivers' Use of Cell Phones Appear to Be Saving Lives of Motorcyclists

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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.



States with moderate to strong bans have motorcycle fatality rates that differ by as much as 11 percent compared to states with no bans, according to a study out of Florida Atlantic University and the University of Miami.

The study's findings were recently published in *Social Science & Medicine*.

"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 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, according to the research.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 16 states and the District of Columbia ban talking on a hand-held cellphone while driving while 38 states and D.C. restrict the use of all cellphones by inexperienced drivers. Text messaging is banned for all drivers in 47 states and D.C.

"Every day about nine Americans are killed and more than 1,000 are injured in traffic crashes that involve distracted drivers," said the FAU 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."

French said he hopes the 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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