

Cell Phones: Should Their Use While Driving Be Prohibited?

ADVOCATES FOR CELL PHONE SAFETY

The following essay, untitled, appeared on the Congressional Quarterly's Web site—www.cq.com—on March 16, 2001.

Yes, Prohibit Their Use

“There isn’t enough evidence to prove that using a cell phone while driving causes accidents.”

A lack of statistical data about a problem is not the same thing as a lack of evidence!

The fact is, we have evidence that a problem exists. We don’t have statistics—not because they don’t exist—but because we don’t currently collect them.

The Harvard Center for Risk Analysis published a study (funded by AT&T) in 1999 in which they assigned a crash risk factor to using cell phones. As of summer 2000, it comes out to 450 to 1,000 fatalities each year.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) says that for every fatality, there are 666 property-damage and injury-producing crashes. So we are having somewhere between 300,000 and 650,000 “other” crashes due to cell phones.

We killed 120 kids and small-statured women with airbags and there was a huge government, industry, and societal response. We killed

150 people with Firestone tires, and the response was the same. Both airbags and tires are essential parts of the driving environment. Cell phones are not, so why do we tolerate this problem?

In many states, police are not required to note whether a driver involved in an accident had been on the phone, so statistics linking crashes to phones are hard to come by. Only Oklahoma and Minnesota record that information, but experts say those states' data-collection methods are unreliable.

"The information you need most is not available, because we are not collecting it," said Mark Burris of the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research. In November, Japan became one of 14 countries banning handheld phone use while driving. "Accidents caused by the use of mobile phones dropped by 75 percent the next month," Burris noted.

"Cellular telephones are important devices for reporting emergencies."

This is absolutely true, and the law enforcement community supports such use. But emergency calls can and should be made from stopped vehicles. Indeed, most calls relate to witnessing a crash. Under such circumstances, traffic is often stopped, and witnesses attempt to render aid.

The cellular telephone industry often demonstrates its commitment to promoting safety for its customers through the use of information packets included with product purchases or customer billing, and through the occasional television ad. All industries include caveats for product use in the literature that accompanies products. Most of us don't read any of it because we know it is provided to protect companies during litigation.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What do you think of the authors' strategy of using quotations that are then refuted?
2. Do the statistics in paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 impress you, or on the contrary do you feel that (a) they aren't alarmingly large and (b) they may not be accurate? Explain your response.
3. In our view, the final paragraph makes an important point but does not make an effective ending for the essay. Reread the paragraph, thinking about its effectiveness as a concluding paragraph. If you agree with us

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No, Don't Prohibit Their Use

Check out that guy in the next lane—the one with the cell phone glued to his ear, who's weaving wildly. Wow, that was close. So close that Ann Landers just came out in support of a ban on driving and phoning. And Click and Clack, the *Car Talk* guys [on National Public Radio], are giving away bumper stickers that say "Drive Now, Talk Later."

Legislators are listening. From Victoria, Australia, to Brooklyn, Ohio, total bans on cell phone calls by drivers have been enacted. England, Australia, Singapore, and Brazil all restrict car phones to the hands-free type. And New York City bars calls by taxi drivers.

But does a ban make sense? At first blush, it seems a no-brainer if cell phones are indeed causing fatal accidents. But lots of activities—tuning the radio, drinking double lattes, refereeing the sibling wars in the back seat—can lead to fatal crashes. No one is banning these.

While in-car phoning does increase risk, the benefits far outweigh the costs. Start with the likely costs of not being able to conduct business from the car or to call home on the fly. We estimate these costs in lost time and productivity at about \$24 billion—over \$200 per household annually.

The benefits of a ban, of course, would include the decrease in injuries, property damage, and fatalities. Our best estimate is about 10,000 serious accidents and 100 traffic fatalities—less than 1 percent of the annual total. Using standard measures of how ordinary people make the tradeoff between convenience and small risks of large disasters, we estimate the cost of car phone-induced mayhem at about \$1 billion annually.

Fiddling with our assumptions—reducing the estimated benefits of car calls, raising the implicit value of lives saved—doesn't change the bottom line. Nor, for that matter, does assuming that cell phone use is actually as dangerous as driving after drinking a few beers. Thus, on

balance, the safety purchased with a cell phone ban would simply be too expensive.

Washington and the states should find out what really makes a material difference in the safety of on-board calling. But until we know more, governments should let the 77 million Americans who own cellular phones make their own decisions about when to use them. The market, in the form of consumers, producers, and insurers, is doing pretty well in developing a technology that Americans are finding they can't live without.

Topics for Critical Thinking and Writing

1. What do you think of the opening paragraph? And now that you have read the entire essay, why do you think the authors begin their piece the way they do?
2. The authors use statistics. How impressive are these figures? In paragraph 5, the authors suggest that their "best estimate" of fatalities is "100 traffic fatalities" a year, but the opposing essay (p. 20) suggests that there are "450 to 1,000 fatalities each year." Whose figures do you accept? Why?
3. How would you characterize the tone of the final paragraph? Smug? Earnest? Thoughtful? Or what? And more generally, offer an analysis of this paragraph, pointing out why it is or is not an effective final paragraph.