

## Distracted Driving in Mississippi

December 2010

### Issue

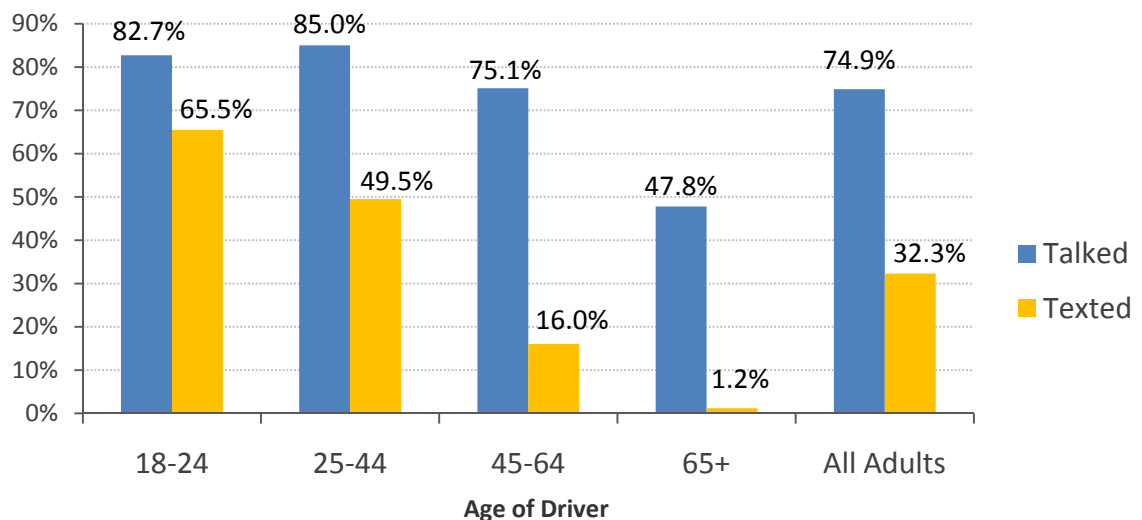
Unintentional injuries are the leading cause of death for persons 1-44 years of age in Mississippi, and motor vehicle accidents are the leading cause of injury-related deaths in the state. Mississippi has the highest motor vehicle fatality death rate in the nation, according to the State Department of Health. The growing use of mobile communication devices such as cell phones has provided more opportunities for driver distraction and consequently, motor vehicle accidents.

Several states have enacted legislation designed to prevent accidental deaths due to distracted driving. The Center for Mississippi Health Policy commissioned the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University to conduct a survey of Mississippi adults to assess their behaviors, attitudes, and opinions about distracted driving and to research policy options considered in other states. This issue brief summarizes the results of this research. The complete final report and policy brief produced by Dr. Ginger Cross and her colleagues at Mississippi State University can be found on the Center's web site at [www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com).

### Frequency of Distracted Driving in Mississippi

Distracted driving is a common occurrence in Mississippi, with three-quarters of current adult drivers reporting they have talked on a cell phone while driving, and one-third admitting they have read, written, or sent a text message while driving. The number of people reporting riding with a driver who was distracted is much higher. Almost nine out of ten (88.6%) adults told researchers they had been a passenger in a vehicle driven by someone talking on a cell phone, and more than half (53.2%) said they had ridden with a driver who was texting or emailing. Younger drivers are significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) more likely to report they had talked on a cell phone or texted while driving (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of current adult drivers, by age, who have talked on a cell phone or texted while driving.



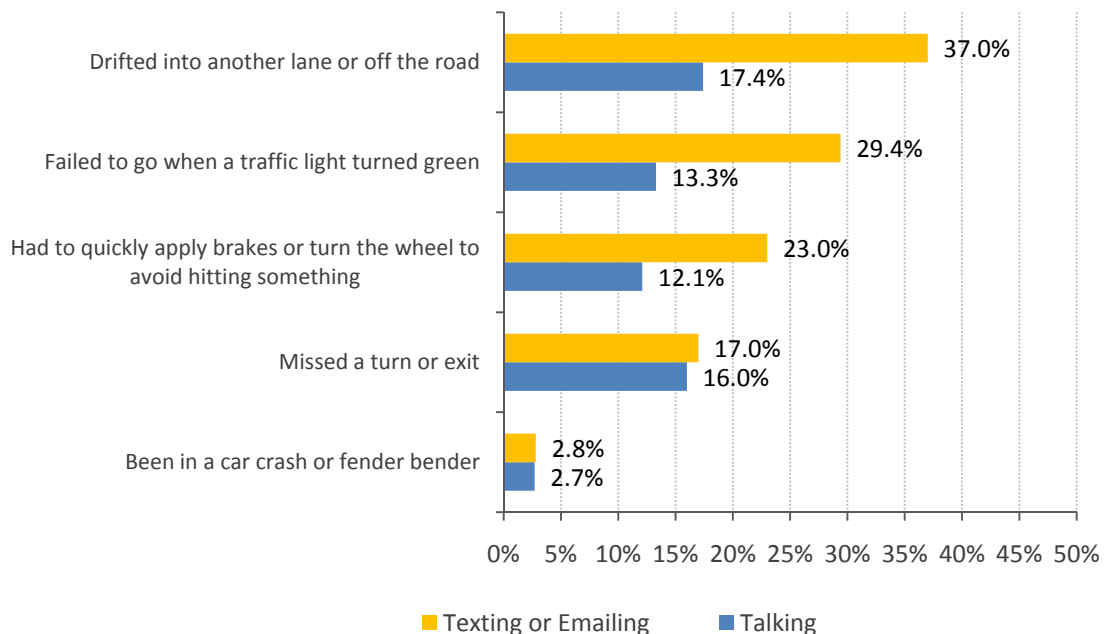
Texting while driving is of particular concern because it involves all three types of distractions: visual (looking at the cell phone while reading or composing a message), manual (holding the phone and typing messages), and cognitive (thinking about the message being read or composed). A 2009 research report from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) noted that drivers were at a 23 times higher crash risk when texting while driving.

*In the VTTI study, drivers who were texting for 6 seconds spent 4.6 seconds looking at the phone, which means that at 55 mph they would drive the length of a football field without observing the road.*



Almost half (49.3%) of current drivers who have talked, texted, or emailed while driving report that while doing so, they have experienced an adverse event, the most frequent being drifting into another lane or off the road.

Figure 2: Percentage of current adult drivers, who have talked, texted, or emailed while driving that reported experiencing an adverse event while doing so



More than three-quarters (76%) of survey respondents said they had observed another driver, who was using a cell phone, driving in a way that put others in danger. Four percent reported they had been in a car crash or fender bender caused by a driver using a cell phone.

## State Policies & Legislation

Nationwide, 30 states and the District of Columbia have passed texting bans for all drivers, and eight more have passed texting bans for some drivers. However, since officers might have difficulty distinguishing between a driver who is texting and a driver dialing a cell phone to make a call, it has been noted that texting bans are difficult to enforce without accompanying bans on hand-held cell phone calls.

Statewide hand-held bans for all drivers have been adopted by nine states and the District of Columbia, while bans on all cell phones are generally applied to just the most vulnerable drivers and/or those responsible for transporting other passengers.

Currently, almost all states have at least partial bans on cell phone use aimed at one or more groups or locations. Novice drivers, bus drivers and public transit drivers have all been targeted for more restrictive bans. Construction zones and school crossing/speed zones have all been identified in some states as locations worthy of more restrictions. Mississippi currently has a texting ban for drivers with a learner's permit or intermediate license.

Public education campaigns addressing distracted driving have been or are currently being conducted in 41 states and the District of Columbia (DC). Driver's education programs that incorporate distracted driving awareness are also being considered and have been implemented in 18 states and DC.

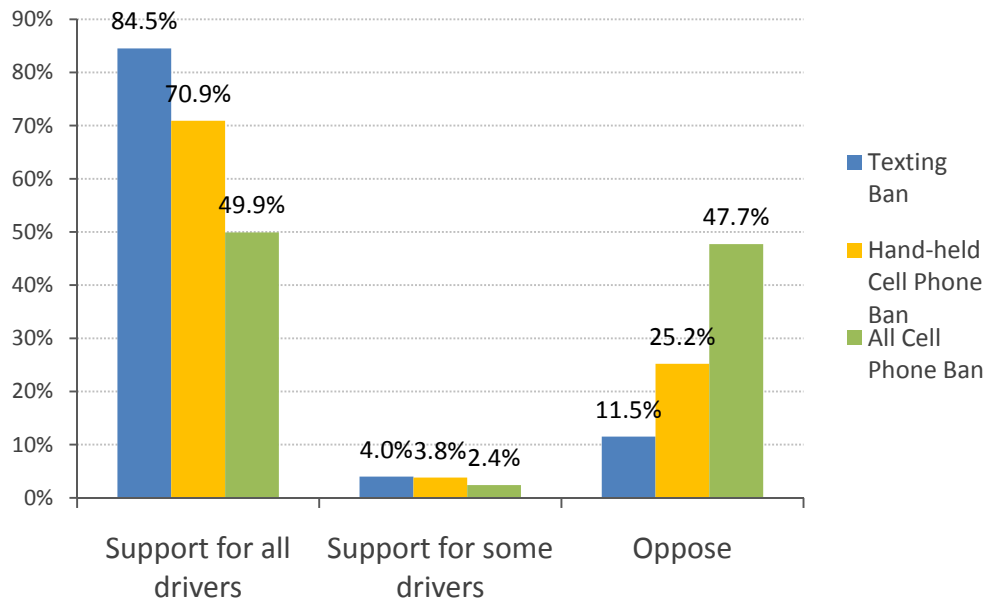
Figure 3: States enacting bans on texting while driving



## Mississippians' Support for Legislation

Most Mississippians support distracted driving-related cell phone bans. Seven out of ten Mississippians support a ban on hand-held cell phone conversations for all drivers, and approximately one-half support a ban on all cell phone conversations (hand-held and hands-free) for all drivers. There is more support for bans on texting while driving, with 84.5% supporting a texting ban for all drivers.

Figure 4: Percentage of adults supporting or opposing distracted driving legislation in Mississippi



Of Mississippi drivers who currently talk on a cell phone while driving, three out of four said that, if a ban were to be enacted, they would stop or reduce cell phone conversations except for emergencies. This applied to both hand-held cell phone bans and all cell phone calling bans. Eight out of ten current texters indicated that they would stop or reduce their texting if a ban against texting while driving was passed.

## Enforcement

One of the key issues in passing distracted driving legislation is enforcement. The dangers of hands-free devices have been noted in experimental and crash-based studies, though their use can be difficult to detect. Bans on hand-held calling and texting might be more easily enforced since officers can visually identify usage of the phone. Some have recommended the use of educational campaigns and/or in-vehicle technologies as alternative means of curbing the use of hands-free devices. Bans on all cell phone use, however, while difficult to enforce on a broad scale, do send a strong message of zero tolerance that may be useful for some groups and/or locations.



Download the full report at  
[www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com)

Center for Mississippi  
Health Policy

Plaza Building, Suite 700  
120 N. Congress Street  
Jackson, MS 39201  
Phone 601.709.2133  
Fax 601.709.2134  
[www.mshealthpolicy.com](http://www.mshealthpolicy.com)