

Students with cell phones may take more risks, study finds

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Carrying a cell phone may cause some college students – especially women – to take risks with their safety, a new study suggests.

A survey of 305 students at one campus found that 40 percent of cell phone users said they walked somewhere after dark that they normally wouldn't go.

A separate survey found that about three-quarters of students said that carrying a cell phone while walking alone at night made them feel somewhat or a lot safer.

“Students seem to feel less vulnerable when they carry a cell phone, although there's not evidence that they really are,” said Jack Nasar, co-author of the study and professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University.

“If anything, they are probably less safe because they are paying less attention to their surroundings.”

Nasar conducted the study with Peter Hecht of Temple University in Philadelphia and Richard Wener of Brooklyn Polytechnic University in New York. Their results were published in a recent issue of the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research.

The study involved online or phone interviews with randomly selected students at Ohio State. One sample in 2001 included 317 students and a

separate survey one year later included 305 students.

Women reported feeling a greater increase in safety carrying a cell phone than did male students, probably because they felt more vulnerable in the first place, Nasar said.

As a result, more women than men said that, if they had a cell phone they would be willing to walk somewhere after dark that they would normally not go (42 percent of women vs. 28 percent of men).

“Especially for women, cell phones offer a sense of security that may make them more willing to put themselves in risky situations,” Nasar said.

The biggest issue may be that when people are talking on the cell phone, they are not focusing on what is going on around them, according to Nasar. The possibility of crime is not the only problem.

In a separate study, Nasar and his colleagues found that 48 per cent of cell phone users crossed a busy road in front of approaching cars, compared to only 25 per cent of those not using phones.

“We know that cell phones pose a hazard for people when they’re driving, but pedestrians may also be at risk if they are not careful,” he said.

While these students were surveyed in 2001 and 2002, Nasar said the results still apply today, and maybe even more so. Back at that time, fewer college students had cell phones. In the 2001 sample, 38 percent reported they did not have a cell phone. One year later, that was down to 14 percent.

The researchers conducted an independent survey of 100 students at

Brooklyn Polytechnic and found similar results, Nasar said, indicating that the findings could apply to a wide variety of students from across the country.

Nasar said the results suggest colleges may want to add to the safety lectures they commonly give to incoming freshmen.

“Students need to be aware of their surroundings when they’re out using their cell phone,” he said. “In some cases, walking with a cell phone might make them vulnerable, either to crime or to an accident.”

Cell phone users should also consider adding emergency numbers to the “speed dial” functions of their phone so it will be easier to summon help if needed.

Source: Ohio State University

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