

Putting the brakes on distracted driving

May 29 2013

If you're still using your mobile phone behind the wheel, University of Alberta sociology researcher Abu Nurullah likely has your number.

More specifically, he can tell what statistical category you fall under. Using [survey data](#) from mid-2011—just months before Alberta's distracted-driving law went into effect—Nurullah and his colleagues determined several characteristics of people who appear to top the risk scale by using cellphones while driving. The data are useful for police who have to deal with unlawful drive-and-dialers, and for policy-makers seeking to change offenders' habits with ad campaigns.

Nurullah says that although campaigns are an important piece of curbing the behaviour, social pressure from family and friends is also important.

"I think the [social influence](#) is the key one. Friends, family, employers—they should be influencing others to reduce the use of cellphones while driving," he said. "Effective enforcement of the laws should include not only fines for such offences, but also mandatory lessons on the dangers of cellphone use while operating a vehicle."

Driving [demographics](#): [Mobile phone use](#) by the numbers:

- Men outnumbered women by almost 10 per cent in phone use while driving. The largest proportion of offenders in both groups fell in the 35-to-44 age category.
- The majority of [mobile users](#) had completed post-secondary

education.

- Among income brackets, the lowest income earners had the lowest level of cellphone use while driving. Rates of use increased with each income category, with those earning over \$100,000 per year being the top users.
- A slight majority of users indicated not being religious.

"These stats can be used to identify the worst offenders for effective enforcement of laws that deter cellphone use while operating a vehicle," said Nurullah. "Since males are more likely to undertake risky driving, it is expected that they would use cellphones more in driving situations."

Attitude adjustment: Social pressure and education critical

The survey also highlighted people's perceptions of the dangers of using a cellphone while driving. The majority of people—those who used cellphones while driving and those who didn't—agreed that texting while driving was dangerous and that cellphone use was more likely to result in a collision. But a much smaller minority said they didn't believe [cellphone](#) use is as dangerous as impaired driving.

Though the legislation introduced in 2011 may have curbed some use, Nurullah says that a common levelling-off effect means other measures need to be put in place to convince itinerant talkers to hang up and drive.

"There should be an emphasis on educating people about this, changing people's mindsets about doing this, because it is risky," he said. "There is no alternative to social pressure because it is more effective than legal enforcement. Social media campaigns can also be designed to make people informed about safe [driving](#) practices involving the use of cellphones."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: Putting the brakes on distracted driving (2013, May 29) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-05-distracted.html>

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