

Police worried they lack powers to probe phone involvement in crashes: new study

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Credit: University of the West of England

Police officers are worried they lack the right powers and resources to properly investigate whether a mobile phone was being used by a driver at the time of a crash, a new study has found.

Four out of five collision investigators surveyed for the research indicated [mobile phone](#) involvement in non-fatal accidents was under-reported, with half agreeing the role of phones was even overlooked in fatal crashes.

Three quarters of British officers participating in the online poll

undertaken by the University of the West of England (UWE Bristol) were unable to report the full proportion of road accidents in their force area linked with mobile phone use each year. A similar percentage of officers indicated that better mechanisms to quickly analyse and investigate phone usage would be most likely to improve data collection.

Dr Paul Pilkington, a senior lecturer in public health at UWE Bristol, worked with the National Roads Policing Intelligence Forum to survey 134 [road traffic](#) collision investigation officers as part of his study into the reporting and recording of mobile phone involvement in accidents.

For his research, Dr Pilkington asked officers across the UK about the procedure they followed in the aftermath of a collision. He was told phones were only routinely seized and analysed in fatal and life-changing injury crashes.

Among the responses from officers were:

"Due to the costs and timeliness of such enquiries this is an area that, in my view, is under-investigated...if properly investigated each and every time, the proportion of RCTs where phone use was contributory would increase significantly."

"We take persons to court where we have seen them on their mobile phones and it gets thrown out. That is with a police witness, so it wouldn't go through on 3rd party evidence."

Dr Pilkington said the findings of the survey raised serious questions about investigation tactics, and described the under-reporting of mobile phone use in collisions as a 'massive problem'.

He said: "Police officers recognise that using mobile phones while driving is an important risk factor for being involved in a road traffic

crash. This is consistent with global estimates of the burden of road traffic related deaths and injuries caused by using a phone while driving.

"But officers in our survey consistently registered concerns about having enough power or resources to investigate whether a mobile phone was being used at the time of a road traffic crash. Because of resource and legal considerations, only in fatal and life-changing injury crashes are phones seized and analysed. In all other crash types, including those involving serious injuries, use of mobile phones is usually not investigated.

"To me, this is a massive problem. If the police can't detect the full extent of this behaviour then we are missing an important part of collision investigation.

"It leaves a significant gap not only in terms of enforcement, but also monitoring of the role of phones in crashes. The result is significant under-reporting of the role of mobile phones in [road traffic crashes](#), as well as inadequate justice for the victims of those affected by the actions of drivers using their phones behind the wheel."

Dr Pilkington said investigating whether a mobile phone was being used at the time of a collision was resource intensive but technological solutions were on the horizon.

He said: "Phones have to be sent away for specialist analysis, and there are sometimes issues in proving the exact time of use in relation to the crash. Time-ascertainment is made more difficult by the long process involved in the analysis of the phone.

"However, there are possible technological solutions. In New York, a State Senate Bill currently in committee is discussing the introduction of a hand-held 'textalyzer' device, which allows officers to analyse [mobile](#)

[phone usage](#) data at the roadside. Such technology offers the potential to improve enforcement and monitoring of the role of mobile phones in road traffic collisions."

The results of an RAC survey revealed in September suggested the number of motorists illegally using mobile phones while behind the wheel was on the rise. Some 31 per cent of drivers taking part in the survey admitted they used a handheld phone behind the wheel compared with eight per cent in 2014.

The Department for Transport will introduce tougher punishments for offending drivers from next year, with penalty points doubling from three to six and fines rising from £100 to £200.

Dr Pilkington, who is now working on a review examining the effectiveness of legislation governing mobile phone use and driving, said: "People are using their phones because they don't think they will be caught. The penalty points have gone up, and the fine, but unless it's a sky-high fine or a ban, drivers will continue to chance it.

"Distraction driving has become a big policy issue and the World Health Organisation has started to talk about it more.

"When you see adverts for cars with built-in dashboard consoles for checking email and Facebook, it is at odds with reducing distraction driving. But those things are what appeal to people, in terms of staying connected to one another.

"Unless technology has a solution, advances in phone technology are likely to make problems worse."

Dr Pilkington has co-authored a literature review called 'Mobile phone use while driving: Underestimation of a global threat' published earlier

this year in the *Journal of Transport and Health*. It can be accessed [here](#).

More information: Janet Ige et al, Mobile phone use while driving: Underestimation of a global threat, *Journal of Transport & Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jth.2015.11.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2015.11.003)

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