

More US than Europeans drivers are on the phone (Update)

March 14 2013, by Joan Lowy

Distracted driving is more widespread in the U.S. than in Europe, according to a study released Thursday that surveyed drivers about their cellphone and texting habits.

More U.S. drivers reported talking on their cellphones behind the wheel than their counterparts in seven European countries, the study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found. Nearly 69 percent of U.S. drivers said they had talked on a cellphone while driving within the previous 30 days. The share of European drivers who said they chatted on their phones ranged from 21 percent in Britain to 59 percent in Portugal.

A larger share of U.S. drivers also reported reading or sending text or email messages while driving. Only Portugal's drivers matched those in the U.S. for this distracting habit—31 percent in both countries. Spain had the smallest share of drivers who said they texted or emailed, at 15 percent.

The study was based on online surveys of drivers ages 18 to 64 in the U.S., Belgium, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and Britain in 2011.

Researchers offered no explanation for why the use of distracting mobile devices is more common in the U.S. than other countries. Mobile device markets in the U.S. and Europe are similarly saturated, making it unlikely that the findings are attributable to differing portions of the

population owning devices in the countries, the study said.

It's also unlikely that differences in local laws can fully explain why more U.S. drivers than European drivers say they use their phones, the study said. Nearly all European countries banned hand-held cellphone use by drivers, yet there was a large variation in the share of drivers reporting the use of cellphones in the seven EU countries surveyed.

"We can't really say why a greater percentage of drivers in the U.S. appear to be engaging in these behaviors. We really don't know," the study's author, CDC epidemiologist Rebecca Naumann, said. "We certainly know it's an area that deserves more research."

In the U.S., 39 states and the Washington district have banned texting while driving. Ten states and the Washington district have banned hand-held cellphone use for all drivers, but many more states have additional limitations on cellphone use by young or novice drivers.

Those laws haven't yet proven effective in decreasing these behaviors, Naumann said.

The study's finding that more than two-thirds of U.S. drivers reported cellphone use and a third had reported texting or emailing is consistent with previous studies. A national telephone survey by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety conducted in 2010 found that 69 percent of drivers had used a cellphone while driving and 24 percent had texted while driving during the previous 30 days. Similar estimates have been reported from surveys carried out by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

"To me this says we still have a huge distracted driving problem. It's a cultural problem, and we haven't convinced the country yet that this is a serious issue," said Jonathan Adkins, deputy executive director of the

Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety offices.

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