

The Under-Reporting of Cell Phone Involvement in Fatal Car Crashes



National data show cell phones were involved in 350 fatal crashes nationwide in 2011. Both policymakers and the public may not consider it as serious a problem compared to bigger fatality factors that can be more reliably measured, such as impaired driving and not wearing seat belts. If cell phone distraction is an important factor in crash fatalities, why don't we have a complete picture of the crashes that involve drivers using cell phones? And does this lead the public to erroneous beliefs about fatal crash risks?

Data Can't Capture the Full Problem

The National Safety Council reviewed 180 fatal crashes from 2009 to 2011, where evidence indicated the drivers were using cell phones.



Of these fatal crashes, the amount coded in FARS* as involving cell phones in 2011:

52%

Even when drivers *admitted* to using cell phones, that figure was only **50%**.

This absence of data contributes to an under-reporting of driver cell phone use in crashes and makes this safety threat appear less substantial than it may actually be.

**National Safety Council analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System.*

SOURCES:

US CENSUS BUREAU /
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRANSPORTATION SAFETY ADMINISTRATION'S
FATALITY ANALYSIS REPORTING SYSTEM /
NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL**



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*** The National Safety Council study on Crashes Involving Cell Phones was funded in part by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company.*

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Crashes Involving Cell Phones

There are three levels of knowledge about cell phone crashes:

▶ **Known** - Driver admitted phone use



Chelsey Murphy, 19 years old and 4 months pregnant, was walking across a road with a friend in Naples, Florida, in May 2010. She and her friend were struck by a hit-and-run teen driver, while he was talking on his cell phone. When asked why he kept going, the driver said he thought he had hit a water cooler. After 5 days in a coma, Chelsey was declared brain dead; her friend was seriously injured. The crash report does not mention the driver's cell phone use.

▶ **Suspected** - Driver didn't admit to phone use

A driver rear-ends another vehicle stopped at a red light. Crash investigators determined the driver should have had a clear view ahead for 10 seconds. There were no skid marks. Witnesses report seeing the driver swerve back and forth just prior to the crash. It has the hallmarks of driver distraction and a crash involving cell phone use, but lacks proof.

▶ **Unknown** - One car crash, no witnesses, driver deceased

A driver in a single vehicle crash hits a tree and the driver is killed. With no passengers and no witnesses, there is no physical evidence as to whether the driver was using a cell phone and no one will ever know. If the driver was looking at a text or email, even wireless records won't capture that.

SOURCES:

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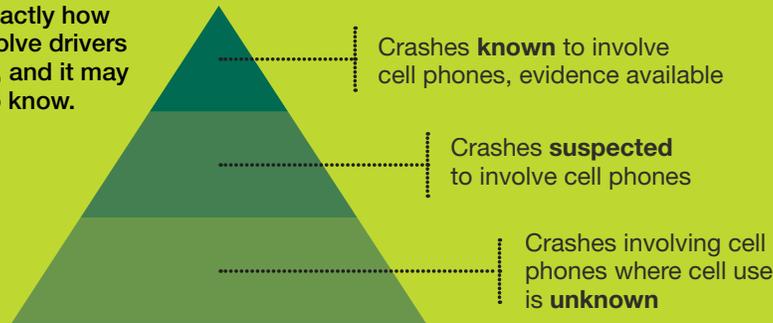
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The Number of Cell Phone Crashes: A Hypothetical

We don't know exactly how many crashes involve drivers using cell phones, and it may not be possible to know.



Even if 100% of known crashes were captured, data would still be greatly under-reported.

Why Don't We Have a Complete Picture?

There are challenges to getting the most accurate information regarding fatal car crashes involving cell phones.



Drivers aren't forthcoming or are seriously injured or deceased.



Witnesses' memories and statements are inaccurate.



It is difficult to obtain cell phone records.



There's no equivalent to a blood-alcohol test to confirm cell phone use in all crashes where cell phones are involved.

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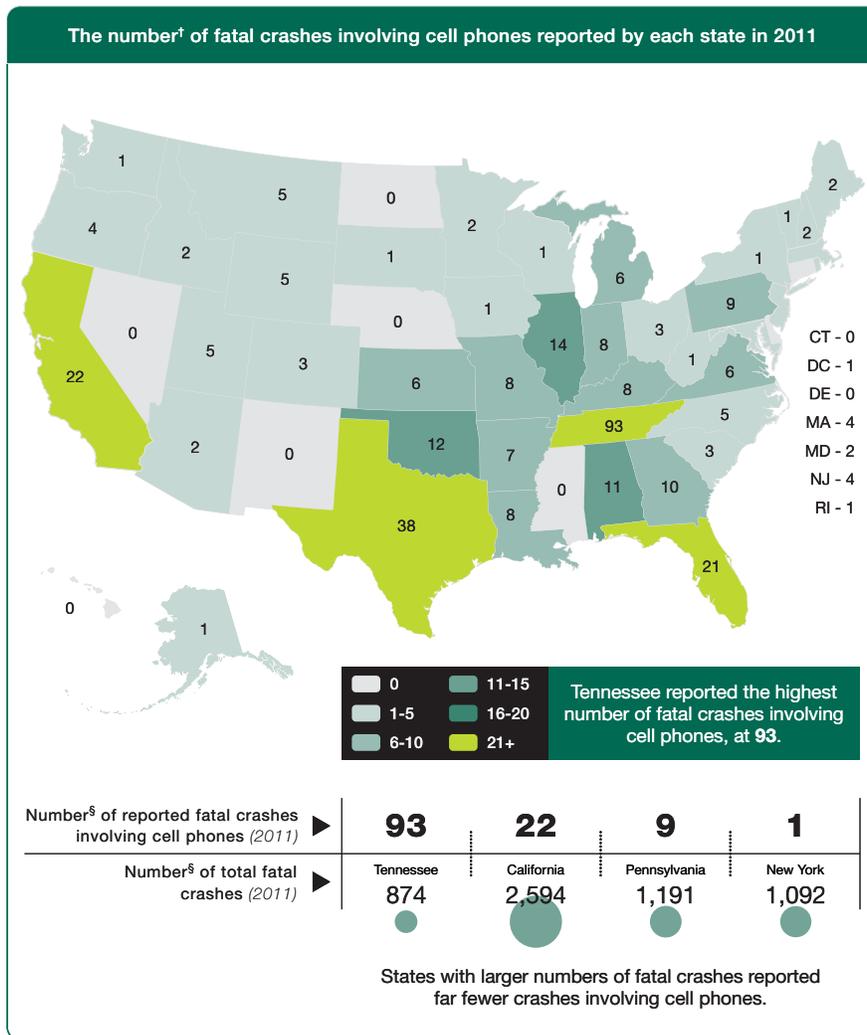
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Cell Phone-Involved Fatal Crashes, By State

While reviewing all crashes coded in FARS with cell phone involvement in 2011, NSC noticed large variances in reporting across states.



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Where is Data Lost in the Process?

Data flows from the local level to the national level when it comes to reports of crashes involving cell phones. NSC analysis found that, when cell phone factors are missing from national data, most often it was not included in original police crash reports.

Local - Scenes of the Crashes



Data gathering begins at the scenes of crashes with drivers, passengers, witnesses and physical evidence.

Local - Crash Report

(*) SHOULD BE EXPLAINED IN THE NARRATIVE.

3	SPECIAL INFORMATION	1	2	3	MOVEMENT PRECE COLLISION
	A HAZARDOUS MATERIAL				A STOPPED
	B CELL PHONE HANDHELD IN USE				B PROCEEDING STRAIG
	C CELL PHONE HANDSFREE IN USE				C RAN OFF ROAD
	D CELL PHONE NOT IN USE				D MAKING RIGHT TURN
	E SCHOOL BUS RELATED				E MAKING LEFT TURN
	F 75 FT MOTORTRUCK COMBO				F MAKING U TURN
	G 32 FT TRAILER COMBO				G BACKING
	H				H SLOWING / STOPPING
	I				I PASSING OTHER VEH
	J				J CHANGING LANES

Police officers or trained investigators record data either on paper or electronically; reports can differ by municipal and state jurisdiction.

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Where is Data Lost in the Process? (Continued)

State - State Agencies



State agencies compile, code, audit and validate data. Paper forms are manually coded into electronic systems, and crash data from multiple source documents are recorded for national uniformity.

National - Federal FARS Program

Occupants and Nonoccupants Killed and Injured in Traffic Crashes				
Description	Killed			
	2010	2011	Change	% Change
Total*	32,999	32,367	-632	-1.9%
Occupants				
Passenger Vehicles	22,273	21,253	-1,020	-4.6%
Passenger Cars	12,491	11,981	-510	-4.1%
Light Trucks	9,782	9,272	-510	-5.2%
Large Trucks	530	635	+105	+20%
Motorcycles	4,518	4,612	+94	+2.1%
Nonoccupants				
Pedestrians	4,302	4,432	+130	+3.0%
Pedalcyclists	623	677	+54	+8.7%
Other/Unknown	185	198	+13	—

Crashes involving fatalities are compiled by NHTSA's FARS at more than 50 state sites into one standardized national database.

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Why It's Important to Know

Beyond the known and suspected crashes, there are an unknown number of crashes where it's not possible to know whether a cell phone was involved or not. This is why data cannot capture the full extent of the problem and policymakers should consider the issue is greater than the data shows when making decisions.

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