

Alarming Hard Data on Drivers Distracted by Cell Phones

We've seen studies in the past that rely on drivers self reporting about their use of cell phone devices behind the wheel. Those studies are concerning. This one is downright alarming.

Carlton Reid, writing for Forbes.com, published an article on October 10th outlining a study done by Fred Feng, a professor at the University of Michigan. It involved installing a Mobileye camera and data monitoring equipment in participants' cars for a study period of between one and three years. The study period was designed to reflect natural driver behavior since drivers ignored the presence of the equipment shortly after it was installed. This allowed them to actually observe driver behavior, rather than rely on self reporting. They were looking for drivers handling their cell phones within five seconds of approaching a cyclist on the road.

This approach is referred to as "naturalistic driving" and has been recognized for its ability to capture exactly what drivers were doing at the time they overtake a cyclist. The study was done in the area around Ann Arbor, Michigan. They made the observation that Ann Arbor does not have a high volume of cyclists on the road and, as a result, it is not a community with heightened awareness of cycling safety such as you might expect in Portland, Oregon or Davis, California.

It is against the law in Michigan to text while driving. It is not against the law to use a cell phone. Sound familiar? In addition, drivers are not permitted to overtake a cyclist while operating on a road with a solid white line. The data revealed drivers failed to obey this law and, when

overtaking cyclists, they commonly failed to allow as much room as required.

The result of the study was that 8% of drivers were distracted by texting or otherwise using their cell phone within five seconds of overtaking a cyclist in their lane. That translates into one out of every 13 cars passing cyclists each day on the road is being operated by driver who is texting or using their phone. Not exactly a comforting thought.

I published this information not to raise anxiety about riding on the road. I am acutely aware of this type of data and I talk to cyclists every week facing the issues of interacting with drivers on the road. I don't believe we should be anxious, but I do believe we should be aware. Like many of you, I make a conscious effort to pick my route and attempt to minimize traffic volume by choosing the time of day, and depending on my schedule, the least amount of traffic volume. Be safe out there and always be aware of traffic approaching you, particularly from behind.

Jim Dodson is a cyclist and an experienced injury & bicycle accident lawyer. Although his primary office is in Clearwater, he represents injury victims throughout Florida. He is a bicycle safety advocate and serves on the Board of the Florida Bicycle Association. He is also the author of the [Florida Bicycle Accident Handbook](#). For answers to you cycling questions, please visit www.floridacyclinglawyer.com.

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