

# Phones Track Everything but Their Role in Car Wrecks

**Distracted driving is a worsening problem, safety experts say. Yet there is still no definitive database of the number of crashes or fatalities caused by it.**

By: Matt Richtel

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 Cellphones can track what we say and write, where we go, what we buy and what we search on the internet. But they still aren't being used to track one of the biggest public health threats: crashes caused by drivers distracted by the phones.
- 2 More than a decade after federal and state governments seized on the dangers that cellphone use while driving posed and began enacting laws to stop it, there remains no definitive database of the number of crashes or fatalities caused by cellphone distraction. Safety experts say that current estimates most likely understate a worsening problem.
- 3 The absence of clear data comes as collisions are rising. Car crashes recorded by the police rose 16 percent from 2020 to 2021, to 16,700 a day from 14,400 a day, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In 2021, nearly 43,000 Americans died in crashes, a 16-year high.
- 4 In 2021, only 377 fatal wrecks — just under 1 percent — were reported as having involved a cellphone-distracted driver, according to the traffic agency. About 8 percent of the 2.5 million nonfatal crashes that year involved a cellphone, according to the highway agency's data.
- 5 But those figures do not capture all cellphone distraction; they include only crashes in which a police report specifically mentions such distraction. Often, safety experts said, cellphone use goes unmentioned in such reports because it typically relies on a driver to admit distraction, a witness to identify it or, in still rarer cases, the use of cellphone records or other phone forensics that definitively show distraction.
- 6 The police can access cellphone records, but the process is cumbersome and privacy laws require a subpoena. Even then, further analysis must be done to link a driver's phone activity with the timing of a crash.

Richtel, M. (2024, January 26). Phones track everything but their role in car wrecks. *The New York Times*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/26/health/cars-phones-accidents.html#:~:text=Cellphones%20can%20track%20what%20we,drivers%20distracted%20by%20the%20phones>

- 7 "That analysis is expensive, and unless the police really think there is a criminal case, they don't do it," said David Strayer, a cognitive scientist at the University of Utah and an expert in the science of driver distraction. He added that "unless someone fesses up to using the phone, the police don't consider it to be a factor."
- 8 Safety experts said the current data were effectively unscientific and inaccurate.
- 9 "It's almost certainly an underestimate, because people don't like to admit things like that," said Jake Nelson, director of Traffic Safety Advocacy & Research for AAA. "It's very frustrating to me that we don't have access to better data, especially now that we're at a 16-year high," he added, referring to traffic fatalities.
- 10 The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration conceded that there was significant underreporting of distraction when it came to crashes. In a statement provided to The New York Times, the agency said it was "actively engaged in studies to examine the ability to measure the prevalence of distraction on the roadway."
- 11 Drivers may not admit distractions to the police but they do admit to the behavior in anonymous surveys. In a nationally representative survey in 2022, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that about 20 percent of drivers said they regularly scrolled social media, read email, played games, watched videos or recorded and posted them while driving.
- 12 The data, published in The Journal of Safety Research, found that 50 percent of drivers admitted to having engaged in device-related distraction in the last 30 days. Research also shows that drivers who engage in such tasks face increased risk of a crash by taking their hands from the wheel and their eyes and attention from the road; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that "at 55 miles per hour, sending or reading a text is like driving the length of a football field with your eyes closed."
- 13 "People who regularly use their devices are downplaying the risks," said Aimee Cox, a research scientist for the highway-safety institute who was a contributing author on the paper in The Journal of Safety Research. She added that the public might find it relatively easy to downplay the risks when there is no clear database or information source that makes it clear how many crashes, and fatalities, the behavior causes.
- 14 "I wonder if that is feeding the downplaying of the risks," she said.
- 15 Technologically, phones are capable of connecting the time of a car crash and the way the driver was using the phone at the time, Dr. Strayer said. That is because phones are equipped with sensors and other tracking and surveillance technology that is typically used for marketing, measuring steps and other functions.
- 16 "Your phone leaves lots of breadcrumbs, but nobody is looking at them," he said.

- 17 Dr. Strayer, who consults on criminal and civil legal cases involving distracted driving, said that in the last two months he had consulted on two cases involving fatalities in which the police did not do cellphone forensics "but I could use the existing phone data to show definitive use."
- 18 Several ideas are being floated that might help curtail distracted driving without stepping on civil liberties. One idea, Mr. Nelson said, would involve using roadside cameras that identify drivers who are looking at their phones or are otherwise distracted and automatically alert police officers farther up the road. Roadside and highway cameras are already used to identify drivers who are speeding.
- 19 A study published in October by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that cameras "are reasonably accurate approaches for measuring the prevalence of cellphone distractions on the road."