

## Can't Let the Message Wait? We'll Legislate Your Fate

Texting while driving: the act of composing and reading messages while operating a vehicle. According to the Brain Injury Society, texting while driving is equivalent to driving after consuming four beers.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, texting while driving makes a driver 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash.<sup>2</sup> In 2016 alone, phones were involved in 1.6 million car crashes and 4,015 car related deaths in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, texting while driving is still very common and on the rise. Currently, some technologies exist that can limit such distracted driving; however, none are feasible options for widespread use because of economic obstacles and personal choice--this means that people will not willingly give up their ability to use a phone in the car when they feel that they can self-monitor their own phone use.<sup>4</sup> Rather, to solve texting while driving I believe it is important to look at how drunk driving-- an extremely similar problem-- has been substantially curbed over the past few decades.

Policy experts agree that the main decrease in DUIs has been as a result of strictly enforced no-tolerance laws.<sup>4</sup> These laws carry impactful punishments such as a *minimum* 6 month loss of license and a *minimum* fine of \$250 after being convicted for a DUI (Ohio).<sup>5</sup> Contrast that with the penalties for texting while driving, a misdemeanor fine of up to only \$150 (Ohio), and it becomes clear as to why texting while driving is still a problem: weak and ineffective laws.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in some states--Ohio included-- police officers cannot pull violators over for texting while driving, instead they need to pull someone over for speeding or for another offense first (this is called a secondary offense). Such inadequate laws reveal their own incompetencies when put into practice. For instance, the states with the least comprehensive texting while driving laws and penalties are also the states with the most distracted driving accidents. Similarly, the states with the strictest texting while driving penalties and laws have the lowest distracted driving accident rates. Utah, for example, bans all drivers from texting while driving and levies a minimum \$750 fine for those convicted. As a result, Utah is the safest state in the country when it comes to distracted driving accident rates. On the other hand, states like New Mexico and Kentucky that do not have strict punishments for texting while driving have some of the highest accident rates in the country.<sup>7, 8</sup>

My proposal is to treat texting while driving and drunk driving the same under the law-- except in emergencies and occupational necessities. This would mean making texting while driving a primary offense (police can stop a car if the driver is texting), extending minimum license revocations, and implementing possible jail time. Such a proposal is not overly complex nor exceedingly difficult to implement. What it lacks in awe-factor it makes up in feasibility. Although some would argue that texting while driving can be solved through either technology or education of the masses, realistically both of these approaches rely on too many outside dependencies including people's willingness to devolve their own responsibility and not overestimate their multitasking abilities. The only true way to make an impact on people's driving habits is to threaten punishment. It worked with drinking, it will work with texting. Now is the time to rigorously legislate texting while driving and drastically curb the number one cause of death for American teenagers.

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