



***3,610 traffic accidents in past two years linked to violations, 13 dead as result***

If you think the local cop or passing New Jersey state trooper is too busy to pull you over for talking on a hand-held cellphone or texting while driving, get this: In the past 23 months, 224,725 citations — an average of 9,770 a month — have been issued for violating the state's cell phone law.

In New Jersey, since 2008, there have been 3,610 crashes involving a motorist using a hand-held cell phone, resulting in 1,548 injuries and 13 deaths. During the same time period, 3,129 crashes involving the use of a hands-free device resulted in 1,495 injuries and 6 fatalities, according to the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

"We are making progress in our efforts to ensure that all motorists are aware of the consequences they face if they choose to talk on a cell phone or text while driving," Highway Traffic Safety Director Pam Fischer said Wednesday. "Our work is far from done, though. Any cell phone conversation while driving, whether hand-held or hands-free, is distracting and dangerous, and can result in crashes, injuries, and in some cases the loss of life. For the safety of all roadway users, we must hang up and just drive."

According to the National Safety Council, each year at least 1.4 million crashes nationwide are caused by drivers talking on their cell phones, while a minimum of 200,000 crashes are caused by drivers texting behind the wheel.

A Fairleigh Dickinson University PublicMind Poll on driving behaviors conducted last year and co-sponsored by the Division of Highway Traffic Safety, found that the number of New Jersey drivers who said they sent text messages while driving increased by 40 percent between 2008 and 2009.

In addition, 57 percent of those drivers under the age of 30 said that they have texted while driving, up six percent from 2008, while more than one in four drivers aged 30 to 44 said they have sent a text message, up eight percent from the previous year. Twelve percent of motorists between the ages of 45 and 60 said they have also sent text messages while driving.

"These numbers are staggering, but perhaps even more disturbing is the number of crashes involving cell phone use and texting that go unreported," Fischer said. "We know that many drivers involved in a crash don't admit to these behaviors, which means that the actual number of cell phone-related crashes in New Jersey is much greater."

New Jersey's cell phone law went into effect on March 1, 2008. Motorists caught violating the law face a \$100 fine plus court costs and fees.

"The New Jersey chiefs of police are committed to enforcing our state's laws that help to ensure the safety of the motoring public on our roadways," said Ewing Police Chief Robert A. Coulton, president of the New Jersey Chiefs of Police Association. "We encourage the motoring public to drive responsibly and respect the motor vehicle laws of our state,"

"While the state's motor vehicle fatality rate continued to fall for the third consecutive year, there are still far too many people engaging in unsafe driving behaviors, including talking and texting, that contribute to a dangerous and often tragic situation on our roads," Fischer said. "If we're to reach our goal of zero fatalities, every driver must take personal responsibility for his or her actions behind the wheel, and make a commitment to safety."

To further inform motorists about the state's cell phone/texting law, the state Department of Transportation expects to have new signage in place on major roadways, including those that serve as major entry points into New Jersey, before the summer travel season. The signs will alert motorists that it's illegal to talk on a hand-held cell phone in New Jersey. A reminder to buckle up, every ride, will also be included on the signage.

Fischer said cell phone use and texting is not only a critical traffic safety issue for drivers, but one that also impacts pedestrians.

"I have personally witnessed the potential danger a pedestrian can face when distracted by a phone conversation or text message," Fischer said. "Several months ago, I literally pulled a pedestrian talking on a cell phone out of the path of an oncoming vehicle. The woman was talking on her cell phone, and didn't check for traffic before stepping into the crosswalk. Regardless of your mode of transportation, you must be 100 percent engaged in what you're doing or you're putting yourself and everyone else on the road at risk."

— *TOM HESTER SR., NEWJERSEYNEWSROOM.COM*