

Mississippi Watchdog

Texting ban could lead to more car crashes in Mississippi

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March 19, 2015

Mississippi's July 1 ban on texting is supposed to make driving safer, but a study of such laws reveals a remarkable outcome: they're often followed by a rise in crashes.

"There's no question that texting while driving is distracting and dangerous," said Russ Rader, senior vice president of communications at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the organization that produced the 2010 study. "Unfortunately, we have no evidence that these laws reduce crashes."

Rader said the reasons for the unlikely increase in traffic accidents are unclear. "One theory is that drivers — these laws are well publicized — may be trying to conceal what they're doing so they're not spotted by a police officer. So they move the device down below window level, thus taking their eyes off the road," he said.

But the institute's study isn't likely to change the minds of Mississippi lawmakers, or of [Gov. Phil Bryant](#). He signed House Bill [389](#) into law last Friday.

One of the lawmakers who sponsored and help pass the ban said the bill sends "a message."

"The way we have it written, they'll treat it the same way we treat seat belts," [State Rep. Robert Johnson III, D-Natchez](#), said during floor debate last month. "Occasionally, they'll pull you over, but they have more important things to do. It's to send a message to the public that we are against texting while driving and we're trying to move forward and protect our highways."

There are other pitfalls to banning texting and social media use behind the wheel, said [Walter Olson](#), senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Center for Constitutional Studies, a libertarian-leaning group. He told Mississippi Watchdog such bans give police more power to stop motorists and produce among people a general disrespect for the law itself.

"Even proponents admit the law would be hard to enforce and some of them say they don't expect it to be a priority for police," Olson said via e-mail. "But all signs are that these laws are widely disobeyed. There's a real cost to passing laws that are widely disobeyed. It undercuts respect for the law in general, including laws that really are important. And — as they implicitly recognize by trying to gather data on stops by race — it gives police more discretion to bust people they want an excuse to bust."

Mississippi already has [laws on the books](#) governing careless driving and reckless driving.

Careless driving is defined as driving with a “careless or imprudent manner, without due regard for the width, grade, curves, corner, traffic and use of the streets and highways” and is punishable by a fine up to \$50. Reckless driving is a more serious offense and is defined as a “willful or a wanton disregard for the safety of persons or property” and is punishable by a fine up to \$100.

[Forty-five states](#) have bans on texting while driving.