

Hanging on the telephone

The AA Mobile phone file

**AA Public Affairs
May 2009**

The AA Mobile phone file: Hanging on the telephone

You can't "accidentally" use a mobile phone. You have to decide to make a call, or to receive one. But around 100,000 drivers at any time are making the positive decision to use a phone while driving, even though it is illegal. Is breaking the law in this way just a result of drivers feeling they won't get caught, or is it closer to an addiction?

Introduction

In recent times, much research has been conducted trying to determine the effects on road safety of mobile phone use by drivers. This has looked at hand held and hands free phones and at texting.

Meanwhile, many comment on the high numbers of people who can be seen using phones, five years after the law was changed. Mobile phone use always ranks highly in drivers' views of bad behaviour. With the law apparently being widely ignored, the time seemed right to look at drivers' views on mobile phones, and to try and tease out information on when drivers use their phones. Hopefully this research could allow a review of how we can best give road safety messages to drivers who use mobile phones in the hope that they will desist. Recent social network trends such as Twitter seem to be tempting more motorists to text on the move.

To get an informed picture of current attitudes to mobile phone use on the move the AA turned to its Populus panel and received responses from more than 11,000 drivers.

History of phones and cars

The mobile phone as we know it arrived to the world in 1983 and in Britain in 1985. In its expensive early days it was a tool for the most senior executives, and a significant status symbol. Business executives were no longer confined to leaving messages with other people's secretaries when trying to get in contact with out-of - the office contacts; and they could also use the mobile phone to contact them while driving to meetings.

Early phones were bulky, and their batteries were notorious for running out. Many were best used from inside cars, where there was a dependable current supply, and such use also removed the inconvenience of carrying such a bulky "mobile" device. The fitting of kits to cars was a major industry and one where the availability of power supply and an external aerial was perhaps as important as any safety consideration. With the phone still a considerable status symbol it was fairly common for drivers to hold their phone, even if they had hands free kits.

As we reached the early 1990s the mobile phone was to most intents and purposes a carphone, and the choice of the name "Carphone Warehouse" at this time perhaps explains just how mobile phones were considered.

There were voices calling for legislation to ban phone use in cars, but many also harked back to similar concerns about the boom of CB radio in the early 80s before deciding that that these worries never showed in casualty figures and there was no need for a law. But of course the mobile phone was destined to become a tool for all.

The status symbol effect of the mobile phone also had a secondary effect. It was a great achievement to get one from your company – especially when most ordinary drivers couldn't afford one of their own. The view fast spread that a mobile had to be answered at all costs – after all you weren't given one to ignore, or to leave switched off. The driver on the mobile phone became a common sight.

By 1997 the AA had published its first advice to drivers using mobile phones, and this was launched to the national press in February 1998. Advice about mobile phone use was also in the Highway Code, meaning that it had become possible for the use of a phone to contribute to motoring offences, particularly careless driving. Two years later the government consulted on its own code, which was published soon after.

Meanwhile the mobile phone had stopped being a tool for executives and had become an accessory for all. People were abandoning traditional telephones, while many tradesmen now advertised their mobile numbers. Part of the reason for this was that it made it possible for them to arrange their businesses while driving. Texting added a whole new dimension to personal communication. The combination of traffic congestion and mobile phones meant that many people stayed in touch with their friends by ringing them from the car. Office workers could also make work calls on the way to and from work.

RoSPA started to campaign for a ban, and a government consultation appeared in August 2002. The consultation suggested banning all mobile phones except those that were "hard wired" into the car, although final regulations only prohibited phones that were being held by a driver. At the same time the first companies began to tell their employees not to use any kind of mobile phone while driving. At this time a survey carried out for the AA Motoring Trust showed that 93 per cent of motorists were in favour of a law banning the use of hand-held phones while driving.

The regulations came into force on 1st December 2003, amid great publicity although at that time legislative considerations prevented the offence being endorseable.

The 2006 Road Safety Act gave the powers for the mobile phone offence to become an endorseable offence (three points), and for the penalty to be raised to £60. The new penalties were implemented on 27th February 2007, with supporting advertising.

Other legislative changes also had a bearing on the use of mobile phones. Sentencing guidelines made it clear that using a mobile phone when involved in a fatal accident would almost certainly mean a charge of causing death by dangerous driving and therefore a prison sentence. Corporate manslaughter legislation extended a similar threat to companies that they, and their management, could face action if their employees chose to use phones while driving.

Yet drivers seem to be addicted to using mobile phones.

How many people use mobile phones?

Since 2002 the government has commissioned TRL Ltd to conduct annual roadside surveys of the level of use of mobile phones by drivers. The results of these are tabulated below.

Percentage of drivers using mobile phones on weekdays.

	Car hand held	Car hands free	Car overall	Other hand held	Other hands free	Other overall
2002	2.0	1.7	3.6	3.3	2.7	2.1
Sep 2003	1.5	1.7	3.2	2.3	1.6	3.9
Dec 2003	Introduction of law prohibiting use of hand held phones while driving					
Apr 2004	1.2	1.9	3.1	2.0	2.5	4.5
Sep 2004	1.1	1.4	2.4	2.2	1.6	3.8
Apr 2005	1.5	1.2	2.7	2.4	1.2	3.6
Sep 2005	1.4	0.9	2.3	2.7	0.8	3.5
Apr 2006	1.7	0.8	2.5	2.8	0.7	3.5
Sep 2006	1.7	0.9	2.5	2.9	1.2	3.9
Feb 2007	Introduction of three penalty points for mobile phone offences					
Aug 2007	1.0	0.4	1.4	2.4	0.6	3.0
Oct 2007	1.0	0.6	1.6	1.9	1.0	2.9
Sep 2008	1.1	0.5	1.5	2.2	1.1	3.3

Other drivers would include vans, lorries and buses.

There are strong indications that the process leading to the introduction of the law, and the law itself cut hand held phone use, but that use rose again soon after. The logical implication is that this happened because people soon realised that the chances of apprehension were low. A similar fall in observed use happened after the tightening of the law in 2007 and it seems that use is again creeping upwards. Oddly, hands free use declines more consistently – perhaps because fewer companies are giving them to drivers.

It is interesting that use is higher in the “other” group (lorries, vans etc), and it shows the need to convince employers, and the self employed of the need to discourage mobile phone use while driving. An AA Motoring Trust review of van drivers and operators in 2006 showed that while many companies had policies on telephone use, many employees of those companies either didn't know about them, or felt that the company did not expect them to comply. The economic downturn, and more unemployment, may well make less employees ignore the mobile when they are driving, making the assumption that any missed call will not reflect well on them.

Enforcement

It is not easy to isolate the number of people who were convicted for mobile phone offences. What is known is that 170,000 drivers were convicted in 2006 and that this fell to 122000 in 2007. Whether this reflected a decline in enforcement effort or a decline in the number of drivers who used a phone when visible to a police officer remains open to debate. However, it is a considerable number. But it also has to be accepted that if ten million cars are on the road at any time, and one per cent of their drivers are on a mobile phone, there are one hundred thousand drivers on a mobile phone at any one time. Against this background even the 170,000 prosecutions seems insignificant. But again each of those drivers has to be pulled over and stopped by the police. Enforcement is not easy.

Mobile phones, risk and accidents

As long ago as 2000, the Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (the Stewart report) looked at the health effect of mobile phones. Although expected to deal mainly with the dangers posed by radio radiation side, it drew great attention to the risk posed by the use of mobile phones when driving.

This report quoted overseas work on the use of mobile phones and concluded that using a phone while driving increased the risk of a road accident by at least four-fold, and this figure has become that most widely quoted in the years since.

Several pieces of research carried out more recently on the TRL simulator have shown a clear trend for significantly poorer driving performance (speed control and response time) when using a hand-held phone in comparison to the other conditions. The best performance was for normal driving without phone conversations. Hands-free was better than hand-held. Driving performance under the influence of alcohol was significantly worse than normal driving, yet better than driving while using a hand-held phone. Drivers also reported that they found it easier to drive drunk than to drive while using a phone.

Texting while driving also affected reaction-time performance more than driving while over the legal limit for alcohol, but less than driving while using a hand held phone.

Experiments conducted by the AA Motoring Trust in 2003, using a protocol designed by the University of South Florida again showed the effects of using a mobile phone. They also showed that the complexity of the conversation has a bearing on the driver's performance. Interestingly, the driver's ability to answer questions correctly while driving was also affected. A phone conversation has also been shown to be more serious in terms of driver distraction than speaking to a passenger, as drivers seem to accept that they can break the conversation while driving because the passenger can see why they are doing so. It is much harder for this to be the case when speaking to someone at a desk two hundred miles away and who may not know, or want to know, that the caller is driving. Similarly the desk bound party to the call may want a far more complex call than any driver could ever manage.

It is hard to produce a definitive view on the role of mobile phones in accident causation. The Department of Transport produces causation data based on the view of the police who attend injury accidents. This would suggest that 25 people were killed in 2007 in accidents using mobile phones, and 323 were injured. It is however practically certain that these numbers would be higher, especially for injuries where post-accident investigations may be less intensive.

Much emphasis has been placed on the dangers of the phone and of distraction. But there are distractions that are good – radios for traffic information or for relieving boring and repetitive drives. Similarly mobile phones have allowed the quicker reporting of accidents, removed long walks down motorway hard shoulders to emergency telephones. In some areas advice has had to change – the AA for example can no longer expect broken down motorists to phone from telephone boxes, with a known location. Instead they phone from a lay-by “somewhere past Stonehenge”. And there is always the opportunity for a driver to take the pressure off himself by phoning ahead to say he is late, or to receive a call telling him his meeting is off and saving him a couple of hundred miles.

We have certainly not seen the end of the development of the mobile phone. Although available for some time people are now looking at the phone as a way of

holding and making small payments. Could this mean that the phone of the future will be used to pay bridge tolls, parking fees, congestion charges and other relatively small sums? Some phone providers now provide traffic information unless the driver opts not to have it. And newer technologies in the latest generation of phone offer whole new possibilities. Will drivers be able to resist them, and could some benefits become so heavily used that legislation and advice has to be reviewed? Only time will tell.

What is happening on the roads today? What drivers tell us

During February 2009, 11,147 members of the AA Populus panel gave the AA an insight in to the behaviour of drivers with regard to mobile phones and their views on the way that those who break the law should be treated.

A general rule was that younger drivers were more “flexible” with the rules than older drivers. In analysing the figures there were signs that some in middle age are similar, perhaps because they were the people who were first to get mobile phones in the eighties and nineties, and who find it hardest to change their habits.

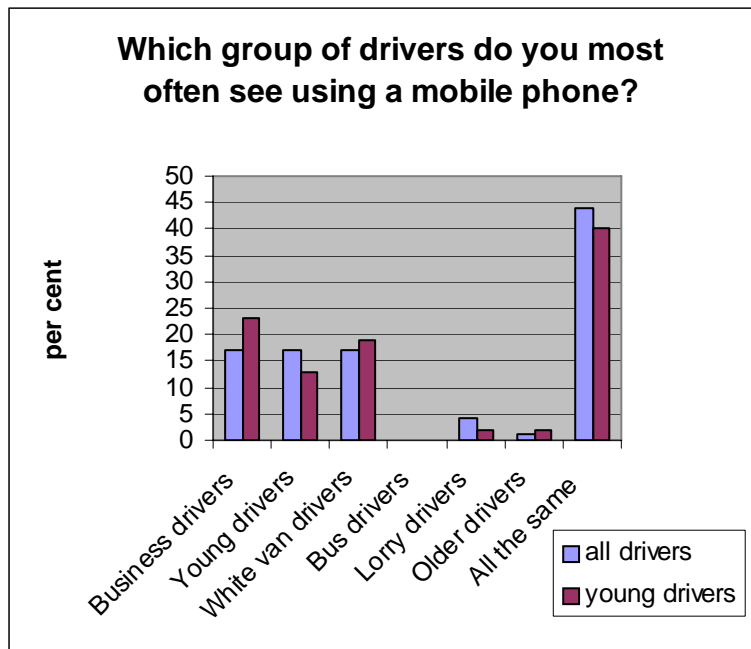
The prevalence of mobile phone use

Government figures show that around one driver in a hundred is using a mobile phone. While members could not be expected to give an accurate figure for the number of drivers they saw on the road using a phone, it was interesting that only one per cent claimed never to see drivers on the phone while they were travelling. Sixty five per cent said they saw drivers on the phone on all or most of their journeys. This probably shows why the government figures, although collected in a robust and tested way, are not believed to reflect the true situation by the vast majority of motorists.

There is no perception that either men or women are more likely to use phones.

Panel members were asked whether there was any particular group of drivers who were most likely to use a mobile phone. The largest number (44%) could identify no particular group while 17 per cent chose each of young drivers, business drivers and white van drivers. Young drivers tended to point the finger at business drivers, rather than at people in their own age group. To compensate, the middle aged were inclined to blame the young. Business drivers were considered to be most culpable by drivers in Scotland (21%) and least so by those in the East of England (14%).

Young drivers (18 to 24) were also least likely (56%) to say they saw other people using mobile phones on most or every journey, against a national average of 65 per cent. Drivers aged 55 to 64 were most likely to notice phone use. This may, of course reflect the different things that drivers perceive when driving. Drivers in Wales and London (72 and 76 per cent) were most likely to see others on the phone, while only 59 per cent of south western drivers reported seeing use on a regular basis.



There was a general agreement that men were more likely to be seen using phones than women. Amazingly 36 per cent of women said that men were most likely to be seen (against 3 per cent women) while men opted for 19 per cent men and ten per cent women. “No difference” predominated.

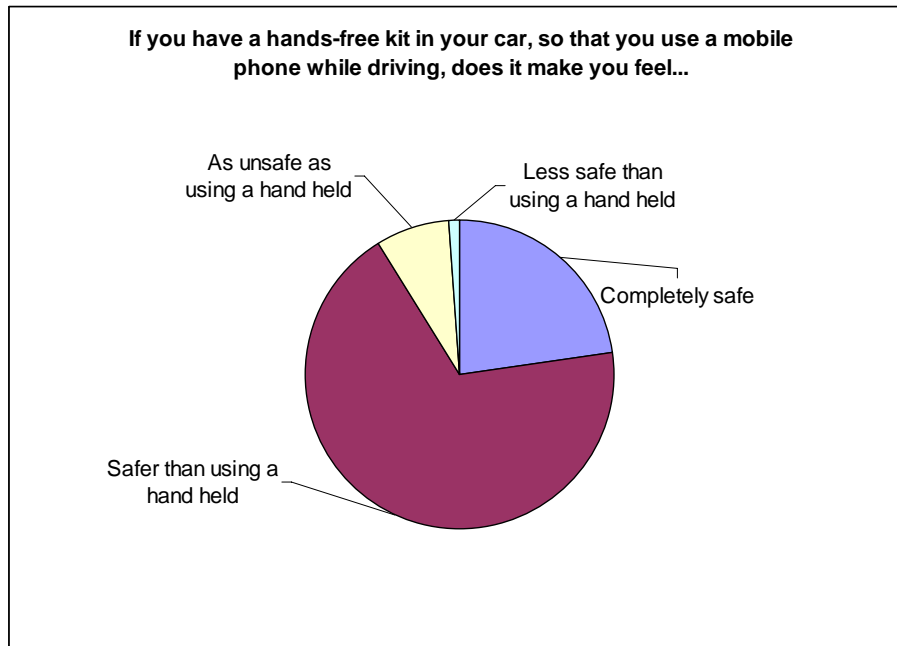
Drivers who admit to having used mobile phones.

More than half (52%) of drivers have never used a hand-held mobile device while driving. It has to be borne in mind that this is “ever”. Many who have used one will have done so before it became illegal, and many of those who have not used one may either have taken up driving, or owning a mobile phone since the ban. That said, the general rule is that the older the driver, the less likely it is that a phone has ever been used.

Just over a quarter (27%) of drivers say that using a hand held mobile phone has distracted them from driving, and that approximates to over half those who have used a phone. However, if those who say they have never used a hand held phone while driving are discounted, this rises to 49 per cent, and only 35 per cent feel that using a hand held phone has had no impact on their driving.

When it comes to hands free phones, more than half (57%) of drivers have never used one while driving, but one-in-three (30%) feel that it is safer than using a hand-held mobile phone, but not completely safe. Ten per cent feel that using a hands free phone has no effect on their driving. The view that hands free is safer than hand-held, but less safe than no phone at all is borne out by a series of research carried out by TRL. Another way of putting this is that nearly 70 per cent of those who have used a hands free phone feel it is safer than using a hand held phone, but not totally safe.

Interesting though the use survey data shows that recent times have seen a greater reduction in hands free use than hand held use – perhaps suggesting that people – or more particularly firms – are now less likely to pay for hands free systems.



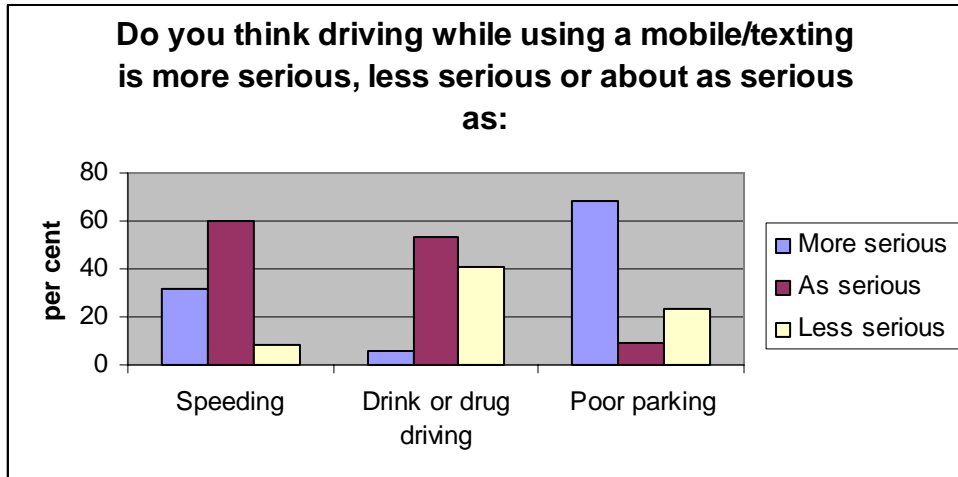
Crime and Punishment

The law and guidance relating to mobile phones has changed often, and changes to other parts of the law and the legal process have also received much publicity, particularly where prosecution policy, and levels of punishment following death has been involved.

Two-thirds (66%) of drivers would expect to be sent to prison if they were involved in a fatal accident while using a mobile telephone (in reality the law would expect them to have caused the accident) while others would expect fines or disqualification. This figure is fairly consistent across all regions and age groups, suggesting that it is a message that has been quite well communicated.

The current level of penalties seems to be considered about right. Seventy seven percent consider it more serious than poor parking, and sixty percent as serious than speeding. That said, one third of drivers consider it more serious than speeding, and 53 per cent as serious as drink or drug driving. More women (61%) than men (49%) consider phone use as serious as drink driving and the older the driver, the more likely the driver to agree with this statement. This does highlight the fact that using a mobile phone while driving is not something that happens accidentally. It is a wilful act, and in that way can be seen as being closer to drinking and driving. Whether “as serious as drinking and driving” and “more serious than speeding” means that the offence should also be punished by a sentence closer to a minimum of one year’s disqualification than to £60 and three penalty points” is a moot point. It is also questionable whether a higher penalty would have a greater effect than making drivers feel they are more likely to be caught.

So drivers know they could die through using a phone. They know that they will go to prison if they kill another while doing so. They know they face a fine and points if so much as seen. But they keep going. Is it rational behaviour, or something closer to an addiction?



Enforcement

Nearly half of the panel members felt that the police could only check phone records after a fatal accident or an accident. There may be scope for publicity to explain the full extent of police powers, and that the police tend to check phone records as a matter of course. Young drivers (23%) were more likely to believe that the police would only check records after a fatal accident.

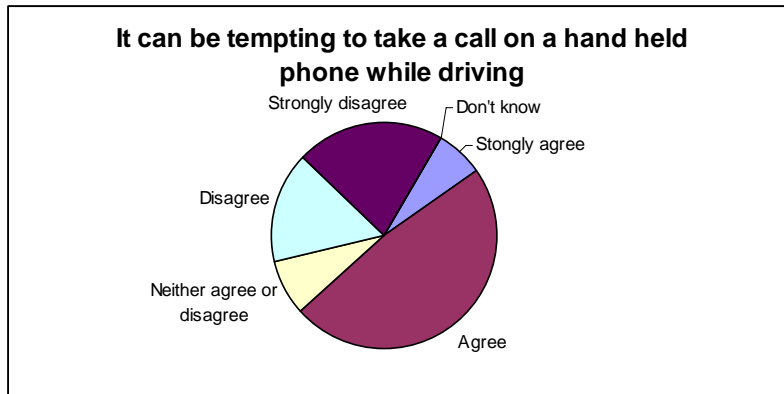
Social conscience

When asked whether when phoning someone they had asked whether the other party was driving, three in five said they had. Attention could be paid to trying to boost this behaviour by people – it is after all fairly well known that an 07xxx number is a mobile number. If this becomes more the norm, more callers may break off the call and this could have a significant effect on drivers' who feel under an obligation to talk and drive. Currently the proportion of drivers who do this is consistent by both age and region of residence but men, 58 per cent, are less likely than women, 65 per cent, to ask.

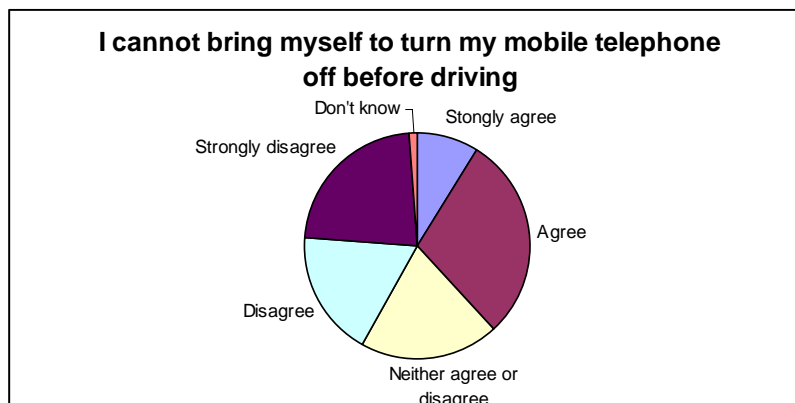
If they were a passenger in a vehicle and the driver receives a call, two-thirds (66%) would ask them to hang up, but a quarter (27%) would say nothing but feel uncomfortable. Although there is no guarantee that this would happen, it does show that many people have real fears of the danger of having a driver on the phone. Women, and the over 65s, were most likely to say they would ask the driver to hang up.

Is the message getting through?

More than half (55%) of drivers agree that it is tempting to take a call when driving and that they can understand why some people do it.



Because of this, a key message has been to switch off mobile phones when driving. But the AA/Populus study shows that over one-third (38%) of drivers cannot bring themselves to turn their phones off when driving. A key question is whether this is a cause for concern, or an indication that advice needs to be changed, perhaps to reflect the realities of driving in a 24/7 communications world.



The survey also shows that when driving alone, two-fifths (40%) of drivers will ignore a text message if they receive one. One-third (34%) will stop to read it as soon as possible, while a fifth (21%) will read it at traffic lights. Only 4% will read it while driving, although this reaches 7 per cent in the 18-24 age group. This suggests that the vast majority would be able to let a phone ring, and transfer to voice mail, rather than have to answer it on the go. Drivers may be tempted to take a call, but it seems they can resist the temptation.



Twitters on the highway

Like an advanced form of flu, the mobile phone issue keeps changing its shape. First the hand held phone, then hands free. Then came texting on the go, in spite of the fact that it seems unthinkable that this manipulative act could be safer than talking. Now, as the telephone and the internet draw ever closer together, the newest phenomenon may be emerging. Today is the day of Twitter, and who knows what will come next?

By trawling the Twitter site one can find hundreds of examples of individuals who admit using twitter at the wheel. This is a growing concern which could lead to more accidents. Actual examples include:

"Twitter used to post number plate of idiots talking on mobile"

"Driving a taxi"

"No downtime to tweet except driving"²

"Twitter and driving at the same time is not good glad weren't no cops around"

"Twitter how I love you. Driving home such a great day"

"Driving home from work, shouldn't twitter drive"

"I'm driving top down"

"Awake, hung-over and driving"

"Trying to stay awake driving"

"Tweeting past a billboard as I speed"

This raises a concern that without concerted publicity and police campaigns to crack down on texting or tweeting at the wheel that the problems and dangers will increase. The AA will be campaigning to raise awareness of the dangers of texting and indeed the potential penalties such as prison.

Conclusions and the future

Mobile phones have become a way of life so it is difficult to give advice that fits all. Having a good hands-free system that is only used for short message calls is probably quite safe. For instance touching a pre-programmed number or using voice-recognition to dial and then say "I will be ten minutes late for the meeting" might actually enhance safety. The driver will be less tempted to speed to get there on time. Likewise responding to a short hands-free call that the meeting is off it is probably better for road safety as the journey can be aborted.

Mobile phones give people the opportunity to use them on the move and that is unlikely to change. Mobile phones are today used to obtain traffic information, hotel locations, idyllic drives, news.

The AA believes that high profile court cases where drivers have been jailed for dangerous driving as a result of phoning or texting on the move will begin to have an affect. It is unrealistic to ban phone use in the car so we must ensure that it is done safely.

High profile police campaigns can have an affect and driver rectification programmes for those caught are showing some promising results.

For some drivers they will be safer to switch the phone off. Others may find it safer to keep the phone on so that they can check messages when safe to do so. This may be too tempting for others.

A recent development that appears to be adding to dangerous phone use on the move is the increase of phone interaction in social networking sites such as Twitter. There are sites showing “20 ways to use Twitter from your mobile phone”. Part of the ethos of Twitter is that you can update your “followers” anytime of the day or night. So if in the car for a four hour journey the temptation not to tweet is too great for some.

In the immediate future we can only try to increase the perception of being caught, and to change social attitudes to the car phone. It is not just the driver who needs to be targeted, but also the people who receive or make calls to drivers. And the use of the mobile phone in the workplace needs to be brought under control too. Firms not only need to tell employees not to phone when driving, but also need to make them understand that they mean it. Many drivers will think that advice is so that the company has obeyed the law, not because the company wants them not to use their phone while driving.