

IOWA

Injury Prevention Research Center

TRIPS Lab

Policy Brief | September 18, 2024

Preventing Distracted Driving in Iowa: Hands-Free Laws

Current Iowa law allows the use of handheld phones for making calls and navigation (using GPS) but bans texting while driving. Laws banning the use of handheld phones while driving are an important layer of protection against distracted driving. Like laws requiring seat belt use and prohibiting drunken driving, “hands-free laws” keep drivers, passengers, and everyone on the roadway safer.

In addition:

- A hands-free law may help officers with enforcement because it would remove the need to distinguish what a driver is doing when holding their phone, which is required with the current distracted driving law.
- There is strong support for hands-free laws in Iowa from law enforcement and the general public.
- Hands-free laws may protect those at highest risk: people on rural roads, those in work zones, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

DISTRACTED DRIVING AND HANDS-FREE LAWS

Distracted driving is a serious public health issue that makes our roads less safe. In 2022, the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported 3,308 people killed and an estimated 289,310 people injured in crashes involving distracted driving.¹ Driving distracted makes maintaining speed difficult, decreases reaction times, and puts drivers at risk for near-crashes or crashes.

In Iowa, there were 123 deaths and over 8,000 injuries (1,142 serious) caused by distracted driving from 2019- 2023. Distracted driving is common and underreported: 88,715 vehicles were involved in crashes caused by distracted driving/ inattentiveness in Iowa during this time, affecting 118,499 people.²

Distracted driving crashes are preventable.

Driving distractions can be physical, visual, and cognitive (thinking) and include eating, applying make-up, and interacting with other passengers, among other behaviors. However, handheld cellphone use (dialing, texting, etc.) is one of the most dangerous forms of distracted driving. Hands-free phones (e.g. using voice activated mode) are an alternative to handheld phones, though are not without risks.

Iowa laws: Texting and talking on phones while driving

Current Iowa law allows the use of handheld phones for making calls and navigation (using GPS) but bans texting while driving. Hands-free driving bills have been introduced and have failed to pass in consecutive years in the Iowa State Legislature.

In 2024, Senate File 2337 sought to ban the use of handheld phones while driving, except in voice-activated or hands-free mode. Exceptions included first responders, those driving farm machinery, and anyone reporting an emergency. The unsuccessful bill combined the hands-free requirement with banning traffic cameras in Iowa. Iowa law enforcement supported the hands-free component of the bill but not the ban on traffic cameras. A similar bill was introduced in the House but failed to pass Subcommittee.³

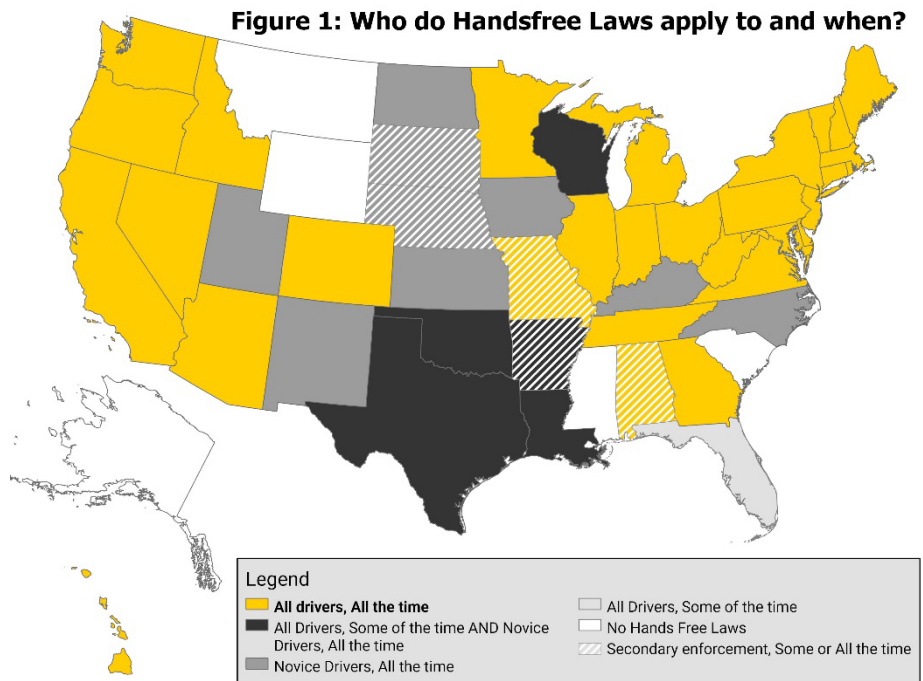
In 2017, Iowa passed a law that made texting while driving a primary offense and established a harsher penalty (a Class C felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison) for drivers who kill others due to texting on their cellphones, but this did not ban handheld talking on the phone. Studies have found that talking on a cell phone doubled the risk of being involved in a crash, while reaching for a phone, texting, and dialing a phone increased the risk 5 times, 6 times, and 12 times, respectively.⁴

Distracted Driving Laws	Does Iowa have this?
Handheld ban	No
School bus drivers all cellphone ban	No
Novice drivers all cellphone ban	Yes – those with restricted or intermediate license (*primary law)
Text messaging ban	Yes (*primary law)

Table 1: Distracted driving laws in Iowa⁵ *Drivers can be cited without any other traffic offense taking place.

Distracted driving laws in the U.S.

Currently 30 states and D.C. have hands-free laws.⁵ All except two (AL and MO) have primary enforcement laws.⁵ This means that drivers can be cited for using a handheld phone without any other traffic offense taking place. 36 states and D.C. ban all cellphone use by novice drivers (e.g., new teen drivers) and 25 states and D.C. ban use for school bus drivers.⁵ Figure 1 summarizes hands-free laws by state, with the most comprehensive laws shown in solid yellow.



Currently, 49 states and D.C. prohibit text messaging for all

drivers, and most have primary enforcement.⁵ Some states prevent local jurisdictions from enacting their own distracted driving bans through preemption laws, including Iowa. Three states neighboring Iowa have hands-free laws: MN, IL (primary enforcement law) and MO (secondary enforcement law).⁵

Studies have found that state bans on handheld phones while driving are effective at reducing handheld use shortly after the laws take effect (by about 50%),⁴ and a 2021 national study found that hands-free cellphone laws were associated with fewer driver deaths.⁶

A hands-free law may be more enforceable by officers.

Under current Iowa law, a police officer who sees a driver handling a cellphone may not be able to tell if the driver is reading a text message (illegal behavior in Iowa), making a call, or setting up navigation (both currently legal behaviors in Iowa).

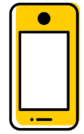
- Police officers from 31 states reported the most common enforcement challenges were drivers hiding their phone use (78%) and difficulties determining what the driver was doing on the phone (65%).⁷
- Officers overwhelmingly agreed that a hands-free law would help with enforcement (86%), should apply to all licensed drivers (91%), and should be a primary offense (87%).⁷
- A hands-free law creates a clearer message that phones should never be handled while driving.⁶ Drivers may be more likely to believe enforcement is possible when the law is applied broadly, which is an important component to achieving deterrence.⁶



High public support for hands-free laws

A survey of over 6,000 U.S. residents found 42% of drivers answered phone calls while driving and 56% continued driving while talking on the phone.⁴

- Studies of the public, however, show high support (70-80%) for bans on handheld phones while driving, including Iowans.⁴
- A 2024 survey of around 1,300 people at the Iowa State Fair (conducted by the Iowa State Patrol and Governor’s Traffic Safety Bureau) found that half (50%) always or sometimes use a handheld phone while driving and 85% support a hands-free law.⁸



Distracted driving affects everyone, but some are at higher risk.

Rural road users - Rural roads often have narrow shoulders, so drivers who drift off the road may hit a tree or other object or go into a ditch. High speed roads, common in rural areas, are deadly when combined with distracted driving. Long distances to hospitals may mean longer travel times to life-saving care.



Pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorcyclists - The percentage of fatalities among nonoccupants has risen from 20% in 1996 to 36% in 2022.⁹

People in work zones- In 2022, around 890 people were killed in work zones across the nation (e.g., roads under construction).¹⁰ Most of these deaths were drivers of motor vehicles. In Iowa, there were 6 deaths in work zone crashes in 2022.¹⁰

Young drivers- In 2019, 9% of drivers ages 15-20 involved in fatal crashes were distracted.¹¹ Calling while driving is common among teen drivers (51-55%), and this is less common in states with hands-free laws for all ages.¹²

References

1. [NHTSA](#)
2. [Iowa Crash Analysis Tool](#)
3. [Iowa Senate File 2337 Lobbyist Declarations](#)
4. [NHTSA](#)
5. [Governors Highway Safety Association](#)
6. [Nationwide Children’s Hospital](#)
7. [Rudisill TM, Zhu M. Challenges of enforcing cellphone use while driving laws among police in the USA: a cross-sectional analysis BMJ Open 2021;11:e049053.](#)
8. [Governor’s Traffic Safety Bureau \(2024\): Iowans Express Concern Over Distracted Driving.](#)
9. [NHTSA](#)
10. [National Safety Council](#)
11. [CDC: Distracted driving risk factors](#)
12. [Li, L., Pope, C.N., Andridge, R.R. et al. Cellphone laws and teens’ calling while driving: analysis of repeated cross-sectional surveys in 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019. Inj. Epidemiol. 7, 65 \(2020\).](#)