

OPINION: Include texting and driving in the definition of “driving under the influence” and make punishment the same

We now live in a world where scrolling through social media on your phone or using it text someone is ubiquitous. In fact, it so the new norm – you are the weirdo if you are sitting at a cafe, standing in line or in public and your phone is not glued to your hand.

It is so prevalent that if you observe people in a line that is 20 people deep, to say 18 of them will be buried in their phone would not be hyperbole. The art of small talk with your neighbor or stranger next to you in line is dead. Social skills be damned.

It is such an epidemic that it is also normal to see people texting while driving. It's everywhere, everyone is doing it. This is one reason very little is done about it – it is accepted and ignored because people know they do it too and if they have a sense of integrity they won't be hypocritical by being very vocal about banning and punishing people for it when they do it.



It is a form of addiction which has commonalities with other addictions. There is a “substance,” e.g, heroin, crack, meth, gambling, pornography, phones. You need a fix regularly to appease brain receptors. You are willing to do extreme things to make sure your habit is fed – with opiates people often steal or commit petty crimes, even rob or mug people. With gambling and pornography, you hurt your family and friends through spending too much money or time “feasting” on your substance. With alcohol, there is that plus the common verbal or physical abuse when inebriated.

With the phone, people are willing to risk their passengers or other people on the road. The only difference between phone addiction and the others is in the preferred substance, but the result is the same: hurting others or placing them at risk – risk that can lead to injuries or even death.

A study by the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) demonstrated texting while driving is six times more dangerous than driving while inebriated. Car and Driver magazine published a report actually show how poor

reactions times are on par with being drunk or worse.

This begs the question: if it is as bad or worse than being drunk why are the penalties not the same? In some states, like Massachusetts, our feckless politicians have made 5 attempts to ban it. Meanwhile, residents continue to be hurt or killed on our roads. The saddest part of everything is that these people are doing nothing important: they are simply scrolling their social media news feed, having a general conversation, even sending a "LOL" or "What u doing?" Even if it was an important message, common sense which is now uncommon these days would dictate waiting the few minutes to get where you are going or if you are on a long commute, pull over and text.



If people are going to be selfish with their phones it's time to have a punishment that matches it. If texting or using your phone while driving is as dangerous or more so than being drunk, we need to have the same punishment for it. Since police cars and officers themselves typically have cameras now, we have video evidence that can back it up and phone records can be accessed.

One of the problems for years is the dishonesty of the people

who use their phones while driving. They will deny they were being ignorant so they can escape a fine.

Until such a time as driverless cars are safe and infrastructure can be put in place for them, people will continue to hurt to kill themselves or others unless our politicians and law enforcement officers do something about it.

I don't see people changing their behaviors under current law and policing – they seem determined to win Darwin Awards. It's time to get their attention by including phone use while driving under the umbrella of driving "under the influence" because the end result is identical.

- **1st Offense:** up to 2 1/2 years in jail, \$500 to \$5,000 in fines, and a 1 year license revocation,
- **2nd Offense:** 60 days to 2 1/1 years in jail, \$600 to \$10,000 in fines, and a 2 year license revocation.
- **3rd Offense:** 180 days to 2 1/2 years in jail or 2 /12-5 years in prison, \$1,000-\$15,000 in fines, and an 8 year license revocation.