The Impact of Legislation in Ireland on Handheld Mobile Phone Use by Drivers

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Abstract
Under the Road Traffic Act, 2006 handheld mobile phone use whilst driving is an offence liable to a fine and penalty points. The aim of this study was to determine whether there has been a change in driver behaviour following the introduction of this legislation. This study found that 2.3% of drivers were still using a handheld mobile phone.

Introduction
Mobile phone use whilst driving is associated with an increased risk of motor vehicle crashes. The Road Traffic Act, 2006 provided for a number of measures to improve driver behaviour and safety. A ban on driving whilst using a handheld mobile phone was enacted into Irish law on September 1st 2006. A previous Irish study in January 2005 showed that 3.6% of drivers in a provincial town were observed driving whilst using a handheld mobile phone. This study has now been repeated in the same provincial town to see if drivers are compliant with the new legislation.

Methods
The methods employed were similar to the study carried out in 2005. Five trained observers were positioned at five different junctions in a rural town. Each observer recorded information on 200 consecutive motor vehicles. Data were collected on gender of the driver, handheld mobile phone use and vehicle type. The study was carried out in daylight hours between 14.00 and 15.00 hours in October 2007 in dry weather conditions.

Results
A total of 1,000 observations were made. The majority of drivers were male (64.3%). The majority of those observed were driving cars. (Table1).

Twenty-three drivers (2.3%) were observed using handheld mobile phones (Table 1). Female drivers were more likely to use handheld mobile phones compared to male drivers (2.5% vs. 2.2%) but this difference was not statistically significant (p=0.73).

Discussion
This study found that 2.3% of drivers used a handheld mobile phone whilst driving. Driver behaviour has improved when compared with the study carried out in January 2005 when 3.6% of drivers were observed using handheld mobile phones whilst driving. This difference did not reach statistical significance (p=0.75).

Many countries have enacted legislation prohibiting the use of handheld mobile phones whilst driving with various effects. Observational studies show that even with legislation prohibiting the use of handheld mobile phones, drivers continue to disobey the law. Despite prohibiting legislation, handheld mobile phone use whilst driving has been observed amongst drivers in New York (1.7%) and Melbourne(1.8%). Whilst initial studies showed a decrease in handheld mobile phone use in New York, this was not sustained in the longer term and a study conducted two years after legislative change showed that handheld mobile phone use whilst driving had increased to 2.3%. This was not significantly different to that reported pre-implementation of legislation (2.3%).

Our study confirms that drivers in Ireland still continue to use handheld mobile phone whilst driving despite current legislation. The 2006 Annual Report of an Garda Siochana stated that 6,171 drivers were fined for using handheld mobile phones whilst driving, in the four months following implementation of legislation an average of 51 people in breech of legislation each day. In 2006, the number of registered motor vehicles in Ireland was 2,261,466. If two million of these took to the road every day our findings would suggest that in any one day up to 46,000 drivers would be driving while using handheld mobile phones. This clearly increases the risk of road crashes. Strict enforcement of the law in relation to mobile phone use whilst driving is necessary to change driver behaviour and to significantly reduce the risk of potentially serious and fatal road crashes.

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References