I Pods are twice as dangerous as cell phones for drivers, a new study finds, as the increasing use of mobile technology brings safety challenges to the roadways.

Researchers at Drexel University used a computerized driving simulator to perform the study, the first to analyze the effects of using MP3 players while driving. Across the board, 12 participants left their lanes, increased their speeds, and followed other cars too closely when scrolling through the iPod looking for media.

Distracted driving is responsible for one of every 11 U.S. traffic fatalities, and the National Transportation Safety Board recently recommended a complete ban on cell phone use while driving, including the use of hands-free headsets. Many states already ban cell phone texting, but few laws include other devices like portable music players, GPS units, and tablet computers in their laws.

"Knowing how distracting cell phones can be, it may not be surprising that using an iPod while driving can also be distracting. More surprising is the size of the effect," said researcher Dario Salvucci, pointing out that scrolling for songs on an iPod proved twice as dangerous as dialing a cell phone.

The growing prevalence of mobile devices presents a difficult challenge for lawmakers and law enforcement officials. Commutes are getting longer for many U.S. workers, who use extra time in their vehicles to make phone calls and perform other tasks on their phones. Despite educational campaigns warning of the dangers of distracted driving, most drivers don’t seem to be listening.

Last year, experiments in New York and Connecticut combined hefty fines, increased police presence, and a massive public education campaign to remind drivers to put their phones away. The results were successful, but if laws don’t specify which devices are illegal, lawmakers are left with little or no recourse.
Further, listening to music while driving is a deep-rooted cultural tradition dating back to the advent of the automobile, and those habits may prove much harder to discourage than cell phone use.

Still, lawmakers will likely take notice of the Drexel University study as they create new safety laws for their citizens.

"As new hand-held/mobile devices are introduced and gain popularity, it becomes critical that we understand the driver distraction potential from these devices and work to alleviate or eliminate distraction as much as possible," Salvucci said.

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