

Texting and talking: the new drinking

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If the U.S. secretary of transportation has his way, all you text-messaging, phone-talking motorists out there will have to change your ways or start getting tickets.

Secretary Ray LaHood said Friday that a federal ban on texting and talking on the phone while driving might be what was needed to improve safety on the nation's roadways. There's no proposed ban just yet — just a handful of laws in a few cities and states, including a ban on texting while driving in Illinois. Talk about the dangers of both is ratcheting up on the federal level.

"If it were up to me, I'd eliminate texting while driving. I think we should," said LaHood, a Republican from Peoria, during a visit to the Post-Dispatch. "If it were up to me, I'd eliminate the use of cell phones while driving. I think that is a great distraction."

Every few weeks another survey or study compares motorists who text or talk on phones with those who drive drunk.

A University of Utah study found that motorists on the phone are four times as likely to crash as other drivers, and are as likely to cause a crash as a motorist with a blood-alcohol level of 0.08 percent.

A 2003 Harvard study estimated that cell phone distractions caused 2,600 traffic deaths annually as well as 330,000 crashes resulting in serious injury.

A study earlier this year by Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that the risk of collision rises 23 times for drivers who text.

But people continue to do it. A survey this spring indicates that 83 percent of teens drive while talking on cell phones, and 68 percent of them drive while text messaging,

This is why LaHood wants laws that allow police to ticket drivers caught punching out a message or making a call.

"That's what's happened with 0.08," he said, referring to the tougher laws on drinking and driving. "We've changed the culture in America because of it. That's what we should be doing with texting. That's what we should be doing with cell phones."