

Tennessee: Cell phone laws, legislation

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Distracted driving news: Talking on a handheld cell phone while driving a vehicle in a school zone is now illegal in Tennessee. For drivers under the age of 18, all use of cell phones is barred in school zones. The law resulted from legislation by state Sen. Jim Tracy and Rep. John Holsclaw Jr. that was downsized from a full handheld cell phone ban. Tracy's amended SB 0954 was signed into law by the governor in mid-May and went into effect Jan. 1. Legislators considered at least six other distracted driving measures for 2017-18. None of the others advanced during the 2017 sitting.

At least 18,122 crashes in Tennessee have been linked to distracted driving in 2017, the state Department of Safety reported at the end of September. The crashes resulted in at least 80 fatalities. More than 24,700 crashes in the state were linked to distracted driving in 2016. Tennessee last toughened its texting & driving penalties in 2016. Those sanctions made texting a moving violation that comes with demerit points.

Current distracted driving prohibitions:

- Text messaging prohibited while operating a motor vehicle in Tennessee.
- Drivers with learner's permits or intermediate licenses prohibited from using cell phones while driving.
- Use of handheld cell phones prohibited while driving in school zones. For drivers under age 18, all cell phone use illegal. Effective Jan. 1, 2018.
- School bus operators prohibited from using cell phones while driving, if passengers are present.
- Installation or use of video monitors in a motor vehicle are prohibited if the intent is to provide entertainment or business content for the driver.