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Drivers caught using a handheld phone falls by 11% after introduction of tougher penalties

Just over 1,700 fewer drivers were stopped for illegally using a handheld phone while driving in the three months after the introduction of tougher penalties in the spring compared to the three months immediately before, new data seen by the RAC shows.*

In total 14,160 drivers were caught for the offence – which now carries a penalty of six points and a £200 fine – between March and May 2017, down from 15,861 who were stopped between December 2016 and February 2017. The RAC collected the data after making a Freedom of Information request to UK police forces, with 38 forces responding.

The sharpest percentage fall in the number of drivers caught was in the City of London police force area with just 41 drivers stopped after the new penalties came in, down from 124 who were caught in the three months prior (a 67% fall). Durham Constabulary stopped 73 drivers, down from 149 (a 51% fall) while Surrey Police caught 279, down from 564 (a 51% fall).

However while 25 forces recorded a fall in the number of drivers caught for the offence of using a handheld phone at the wheel after the new penalties, 11 saw a rise and two saw the number unchanged. Kent Police caught 337 drivers, up from 237 (a 42% rise), Gwent Police caught 79, up from 56 (a 41% rise) and Leicestershire Police caught 134, up from 98 (a 37% rise).

The data comes just months after research for the [2017 RAC Report on Motoring](#) highlighted how [a hard core of more than nine million motorists continue to persist using a handheld phone while they are driving](#). The

number admitting to making or receiving calls illegally was at 23%, down from 31% in 2016, but of those questioned about the new penalties 15% - or an estimated 5.3m drivers – said they had not changed their habits at all.

RAC road safety spokesman Pete Williams said: “It is still much too early to tell if the stricter penalties that were introduced in the spring are changing drivers’ behaviour, but these figures perhaps give hope that at least some are starting to get the message that driving and using a handheld phone to talk, text or tweet don’t mix.

“Following the introduction of tougher penalties for using a handheld phone at the wheel from March, we know police forces are running regular targeted campaigns to catch offenders – so one way of reading these new figures is to say that this activity, at least in some parts of the country, is beginning to yield results. But the flipside to this is the possibility that enforcement levels are still much lower than they need to be to stamp out this illegal activity.

“We believe the low overall numbers still represent just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the real numbers of drivers who are using a handheld phone while driving. RAC research suggests that there is still a hard core of more than nine million motorists that think it’s acceptable to text, talk or even take video while they are meant to be focused on driving. So while we don’t know how many police hours were spent enforcing the law from March, it may be the case that lower numbers of drivers being caught simply reflects a lower level of enforcement in some areas – and the opposite may be true with those forces that caught more drivers.

“The severe cuts in the number of dedicated roads policing officers across the UK, down 27% in the five years to 2015, continues to be a major source of concern. We expect it will be having an impact on enforcement levels – not least because catching people committing the crime of using a handheld phone at the wheel relies on officers observing drivers’ behaviour. There is, as yet, no automated way of catching offenders like there is when it comes to speeding.

“Regardless of the reasons for the fall in offenders being caught, it is clear there is still an enormous job to be done to show to drivers that persist in using a handheld phone that it is both against the law and extremely dangerous.

“The RAC backs campaigns run by a number of national newspapers which draw attention to one of the most topical road safety issues of the 21st century and complement the RAC’s own Be Phone Smart initiative which challenges drivers to rethink their relationship with their mobile phone when in the car and encourages them to make and share a pledge to stay safe and legal at our Be Phone Smart website.”

Full FOI results:

Police force	Drivers caught Dec 2016 - Feb 2017	Drivers caught Mar - May 2017	% change
City of London Police	124	41	-66.9%
Durham Constabulary	149	73	-51.0%
Surrey Police	564	279	-50.5%
Dyfed-Powys Police	215	110	-48.8%
Humberside Police	230	152	-33.9%
Hampshire Constabulary	881	590	-33.0%
Cleveland Police	129	90	-30.2%
South Wales Police	153	107	-30.1%
Hertfordshire Constabulary	376	269	-28.5%
Thames Valley Police	1,205	888	-26.3%
Bedfordshire Constabulary	156	117	-25.0%
West Yorkshire Police	603	475	-21.2%
Suffolk Constabulary	396	313	-21.0%
Greater Manchester Police	524	419	-20.0%
Northumbria Police	167	142	-15.0%
Norfolk Constabulary	321	274	-14.6%
Lancashire Constabulary	209	185	-11.5%

Cheshire Constabulary	583	524	-10.1%
South Yorkshire Police	174	157	-9.8%
Merseyside Police	487	447	-8.2%
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	171	163	-4.7%
Metropolitan Police	5,090	4,908	-3.6%
Nottinghamshire Police	137	134	-2.2%
Avon and Somerset	176	174	-1.1%
Essex Police	611	609	-0.3%
Dorset Police	183	183	0.0%
Gloucestershire Constabulary	103	103	0.0%
Northamptonshire Police	82	86	4.9%
North Wales Police	138	157	13.8%
Wiltshire Police	86	100	16.3%
Staffordshire Police	260	305	17.3%
Derbyshire Constabulary	106	130	22.6%
Devon & Cornwall Police	243	314	29.2%
Lincolnshire Police	101	133	31.7%
West Midlands Police	337	459	36.2%
Leicestershire Police	98	134	36.7%
Gwent Police	56	79	41.1%
Kent Police	237	337	42.2%
TOTAL	15,861	14,160	-10.7%

Notes to Editors

* Source: Freedom of Information request to all UK police forces. The two questions asked were: 'How many drivers were caught using a handheld mobile phone at the wheel between December 2016 – February 2017 (inclusive)?' and 'How many drivers were caught using a handheld mobile phone at the wheel between March 2017 – May 2017 (inclusive)'.

About the RAC

First formed in 1897 the RAC has been looking after the needs of its members and championing the interests of motorists for 120 years.

Today it has more than eight million members and is one of the UK's most progressive motoring organisations, providing services for both private and business motorists. Whether it's roadside assistance, insurance, buying a used car, vehicle inspections and checks, legal services or up-to-the-minute traffic and travel information – the RAC offers a solution for all motoring needs. The RAC is committed to making motoring easier, safer, more affordable and more enjoyable for drivers and road users.

The RAC is the motorist's champion and campaigns to support the interests of its members and UK motorists at a national level. This includes voicing concerns about the increasing cost of motoring, particularly the price of fuel and the high level of tax levied on it, advancing levels of road safety, and supporting the needs of all drivers, from young to old.

The RAC's annual [Report on Motoring](#) – first published in 1989 – provides a clear insight into the concerns and issues facing today's motorists.

For the very latest news on UK fuel prices, check [RAC Fuel Watch](#) or follow [#racfuelwatch on Twitter](#). RAC Fuel Watch is a comprehensive guide to the latest UK unleaded petrol and diesel prices – both at the wholesale level and at the pump. RAC Fuel Watch analyses how prices changed through the previous month and compares the most recent prices with those from three, six and 12 months before.

Key facts:

- RAC patrols fix four out of five vehicles at the roadside and on average within 30 minutes

- RAC vans carry more than 500 parts and tools to get members' vehicles going again
- 92% of members would recommend RAC Rescue to their friends and family

Contacts



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