

'Call if You Have Trouble': Mobile Phones and Safety among College Students

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Abstract

In theory, mobile phone use may have beneficial and harmful effects. Individuals may use mobile phones to call for help or report various dangers and emergencies, but they may also go places they would not normally go without the phone. To test the perceptions of safety and subsequent behavior associated with mobile phone use, we conducted two surveys. One survey of 317 undergraduates at The Ohio State University (OSU) found that most students reported having a mobile phone and feeling that it made them feel safer at night. A follow-up survey of 305 undergraduates at OSU found that about 40% of students with mobile phones stated that, with a mobile phone, they walked where they normally would not. However, smaller percentages said they used their mobile phones to call for help either in a crime or non-crime situation or to report an accident, a crime, a reckless driver or a hazardous situation. The results suggest favorable and unfavorable outcomes associated with the mobile phone. Although using it to call for help from a threat, crime, or to report other unsafe conditions has value, the increased perceived safety associated with it may lead students to engage in risky behavior that could increase their chances of becoming a victim. Future work should consider whether mobile phone use increases or decreases the likelihood of victimization and of catching a predator.

On the evening of 22 November 2003 college student Dru Sjodin was in a mall parking lot talking on her mobile phone with her boyfriend, when she said something and the phone went silent. Her body was found five months later. She had been abducted from that parking lot, raped and murdered.

Introduction

Americans keep mobile phones in their purses or hands and conduct conversations just about anywhere (Sunderland, 1999), and mobile phone use exploded from 38 million users in 1996 to 207 million users in 2005 (Katz and Aspden, 1998; Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association, 2005). The higher number of users reflects multiple users (such as family members) of mobile phones, and the data suggest about equal numbers of male and female users. Users are more likely to have higher income, higher education, to be married or have a partner, have children, and to have a full-time job (Rice and Katz, 2003). From 2002 through 2005 the percentage of households with multiple mobile phones grew from approximately 53% to almost 62% (Goodstadt, 2006). Some people have cut the wire, making mobile phones their only telephone (Rice and Katz, 2003; Townsend, 2000).

The widespread use of mobile phones may affect social and geographical aspects of young adults' lives, disassociating them from or enlivening urban public spaces (Kopomaa, 2000; Katz, 2003; Cooper *et al.*, 2004). In particular, it has importance for

perceived safety. Studies show that security concerns underlie females and students having mobile phones and also represent an important factor to males and parents (Burgos, 1999; Katz, 2003). Research has found higher mobile phone ownership among families with children than among those with no children (Katz and Aspden, 1998; Rice and Katz, 2003). It is reasonable to ask how the assumed safety benefits derived from a mobile phone affect the actual safety risks to potential users. Because the mobile phone technology frees the user from a fixed location (Jones *et al.*, 2003; Townsend, 2000), it is reasonable to suggest that the use of mobile phones will change spatial behavior. This article examines the impact of mobile phones on college students' perceptions and likely movements in time and space, particularly in relation to their safety in public spaces.

Carrying a mobile phone may cause the user to feel safer. That sense of safety, in turn, might lead to riskier behavior. Mobile phone use also reduces situation awareness. Studies have consistently found that talking on mobile phones (whether hand held or hands free) distracted users' attention, slowed their reaction time and increased crashes and near crashes for drivers (McKnight and McKnight, 1993; Violanti, 1997; 1998; Lambie *et al.*, 1999; Parkes and Hooijmeijer, 2000; Royal, 2003; Klauer *et al.*, 2006). The combination of increased risk-taking behavior and reduced situation awareness put individuals in greater danger.

Having a mobile phone can have two different and opposite effects on the carrier's behavior. In one circumstance, individuals may use a mobile phone as a safety precaution to prevent or report an emergency. As such, it may serve as a device to use in response to scanning the environment — natural surveillance or monitoring (Green, 2002). In support of this hypothesis, a random telephone survey in Australia found that about 5% of mobile phone users made use of their phone to report a crime (Chapman and Schofield, 1998); and the media report examples of people using camera phones as a scanning device to photograph a crime, criminal or the license plate of an offender (Niese, 2004).

Paradoxically, however, if carrying a mobile phone makes users feel sufficiently safe, it may lead them to take increased personal risks, thereby exposing themselves to potential victimization. This may be thought of as a form of risk homeostasis, as suggested by Wilde (1998), in which people adjust their behavior to new technologies that increase safety by increasing their risk-taking behavior, thus maintaining a constant level of overall risk.

Mobile phone users may go places or do things they would not otherwise do, such as walk through a dangerous area alone late at night. A survey of 1,100 Hawaiians hints at the potential danger: Davis (1993: 641) reported that the mobile phone fits the illusion of 'freedom and independence' and, of particular relevance to victimization, noted that mobile phone use increased adventurous or risk-taking activities, such as going to unfamiliar places, under the assumption that the mobile phone would serve as a safety net. A study of children (ages 10 to 16) found that mobile phone owners were 'more likely to report visiting dangerous places than non-owners' (Pain *et al.*, 2005: 824). The children also reported taking a mobile phone with them to avoid victimization and that having a cell phone made them feel safer in public spaces and gave them a greater spatial range.

Guardianship is one of three aspects of victimization (Felson, 1994; Fisher and Wilkes, 2003). Talking on a mobile phone may reduce a person's situation awareness, thus reducing their guardianship, and making them more likely to become a victim (the reduced situation awareness may also increase their risk of having an accident). For drivers, research has repeatedly found distracted attention, reduced situation awareness, and increased rates of accidents associated with talking on a mobile phone (McKnight and McKnight, 1993; Redelmeier and Tibshirani, 1997; Violanti, 1997; 1998; Lambie *et al.*, 1999; Strayer and Johnson, 2001; Patten *et al.*, 2004) — the decrement in situation awareness also holds for hands-free mobile phones (Parkes and Hooijmeijer, 2000). The findings may apply to pedestrians. Nasar *et al.* (forthcoming 2008) found that pedestrians

talking on a mobile phone were less likely to recall objects along their route than individuals holding but not talking on one.

Understanding the potential impact of mobile phones use on victimization has particular relevance to young people. Studies have found that young people (ages 16 to 24 years old) have the highest rates of personal and property victimization (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001; Kershaw *et al.*, 2001) and that college students have higher rates of burglary, robbery and violence than do comparable groups (Chalcraft and Wilson, 2002), with 21.4% in the US and 35.4% in England experiencing a personal crime during a period of approximately 8 months (Fisher and Wilkes, 2003).

The present research examines the relationship between mobile phone use, place and safety among college students. The increased feelings of safety in relation to a mobile phone may arise from its role in a framework of actions individuals take when they fear criminal victimization. Researchers describe three categories of behavioral reactions to fear of crime: avoidance, protective reactions and collective reactions (Gates and Rohe, 1987). Avoidance involves staying away from people or situations that may expose one to risk of victimization; protection involves efforts such as carrying a weapon or whistle to guard one's self or property; and collective reactions involve group activities such as communication, mutual surveillance, intervention, watching for suspicious persons, and only going to places perceived as potentially dangerous with others. Carrying a mobile phone may have both protective and collective qualities. Like a whistle, it is protective in allowing the carrier to alert 911 or others of a crime or of their need for help and, with a picture phone, to send a photo of the offender to the police for apprehension. It is also collective in that talking with others brings the other person's voice and ears to the carrier; but as the other individual is not physically present, it is, in a sense, a virtual collective response. As the phone can serve as an instrument for both protective and collective reactions, it would make carriers feel safer and reduce the avoidance reaction, leading them to visit places, people and situations that otherwise might be fearful.¹

Fear of crime varies with gender, with females reporting higher baseline levels of fear than do males, and in particular higher baseline levels of fear of personal victimization than do males (Nasar and Fisher, 1993; Ferraro, 1996; Fisher and Sloan, 2003; Schafer *et al.*, 2006). If mobile phones make carriers feel safer, and lead them to go places they would not normally go, the change from baseline should be greater for females than males, who would have relatively low baseline fears.

For mobile phone use, in relation to fear and likely spatial behavior, the research and theory suggest the following expectations:

- 1 Having a mobile phone increases college students' feelings of safety from criminal victimization.
- 2 Having a cell phone increases the likelihood that users feeling safe might increase risk-taking behavior — going places individuals would not normally go without mobile phone.
- 3 Compared to males, females report larger increases in feelings of safety with a mobile phone.
- 4 Compared to males, females report a larger increase in risk-taking behavior — going places they would not normally go without mobile phones.
- 5 Students report collective-response benefits (we expected to find some benefits from the mobile phone in reporting crimes, calling for help, and reporting other accidents and hazards) related to having a mobile phone.

1 Individuals may have a 'safety utility', their sense of how much risk they are willing to endure. If so, the decision to visit places perceived as more dangerous may balance out against the added perceived (and possibly actual) safety of carrying or talking on a mobile phone.

Method

Respondents

In a first study, a survey center at The Ohio State University selected at random 600 undergraduate student names (from a population of 32,608) and used them to obtain 317 completed surveys (52.8% response rate), with 198 completing it on the Web and 119 completing it via a phone interview. A year later, the Center selected at random 499 undergraduates (from a population of 34,404) to get a sample of 305 completed surveys (67.6% response rate). With student populations of more than 30,000, the probability of duplicates across the two samples would be small.

The sampling process involved several steps, and the survey used a multi-modal approach to data collection. The Center reviewed and cleaned the data files for current undergraduate students to ensure that the random selection drew from only those cases in which the student was involved on the main campus and for which contact information existed. Prospective respondents with an email address first received an email solicitation, which included a link to a web site and provided a user name and password that enabled them to enter the site and complete the survey. After a short time, those respondents who did not complete the survey received a follow-up email reminder asking them to participate. After two weeks, the Center tried to contact those individuals who did not complete the web survey or completed only part of it. Of the 283 cases where there was a failure to complete the survey, 4 were ineligible as the student was no longer an undergraduate student, in 46 cases the Center found incorrect or non-working numbers, in 4 cases the student would not be available during the study period, 12 students refused to participate via phone, and 16 students did not complete the full survey. In the other cases, the Center could not successfully contact the student to complete the survey.

In the second survey, of the 194 cases that did not lead to completed surveys, 5 respondents were ineligible as the student was no longer an undergraduate student, in 20 cases the Center could not reach the student because of an incorrect or non-working phone, in one case the sampled student would not be available during the study period. In 37 cases the student or household refused the interview, and in 8 cases the student only completed part of the interview. In the other cases the Center could not successfully contact the student to complete the survey.

Table 1 shows some demographic characteristics of the respondents in each survey. As you can see, the sample was predominantly white, single students under 24 years old, who worked part time or full time. The sample also had slightly more females than males and between 18% and 31% of students from each undergraduate year.

The 95% confidence interval level sampling error for the sample is plus or minus 5.5 percentage points. This means that in 19 out of 20 cases, the results for this sample will differ due to a sampling error of no more than 5.5 percentage points in either direction from what would have occurred in interviews with all undergraduates at the OSU Columbus campus.

Instrument

As part of a longer first survey, the interviewer asked the following question:

If you carry a mobile phone while walking alone at night, how does it affect your feeling of safety? Would you say that carrying the mobile phone makes you feel:

- A lot safer
- Somewhat safer
- No more or less safe
- Somewhat less safe
- Not applicable — don't carry a mobile phone.

Table 1 Characteristics of the sample

	First Sample (n = 317) %	Second Sample (n = 305) %
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	51.4	45.9
Male	48.6	54.1
<i>Race</i>		
White	78.2	81.6
Black/African American	7.6	7.3
Asian	4.7	5.2
Hispanic/Latino(a)/Chicano(a)	1.6	3.3
Native American/Amer. Indian	1.9	–
Pacific Islander	.6	–
Other	1.9	1.3
Refused/Don't know	3.5	1.3
<i>Year born</i>		
1983	–	11.1
1982	14.5	20.3
1981	23.0	19.0
1980	17.7	17.4
1979	13.9	13.4
1978	12.9	5.2
1977	5.4	2.6
1972–1976	5.7	6.3
1966–1971	3.1	3.0
1946–1963	2.1	1.0
Refused	1.6	1.0
<i>Kind of job other than student</i>		
Work full time (35 hours/week or more)	7.9	12.1
Work Part-time	53.0	63.0
Don't work full- or part-time	36.6	36.7
Refused/Don't know	2.5	0.3
<i>Year in school</i>		
Freshman	21.8	18.4
Sophomore	24.3	24.3
Junior	23.3	24.3
Senior	30.6	31.5
Don't know		1.6
<i>Citizenship</i>		
US citizen	95.6	95.4
Non citizen but resident or international student	3.4	4.6

Table 1 *Continued*

	First Sample (n = 317) %	Second Sample (n = 305) %
<i>Marital Status</i>		
Single	89.8	94.1
Married	6.3	5.2
Cohabiting or living as married	2.5	0.3
Divorced/ separated	0.6	0.3
Refused	0.6	–
<i>Family total household income</i>		
Less than \$25,000	12.9	13.4
\$25,000–\$50,000	13.5	20.4
\$50,001–\$75,000	16.7	19.1
\$75,001–\$100,000	5.5	15.7
\$100,001–\$150,000	9.8	8.2
More than \$ 150,000	6.3	4.6
Refused	9.1	2.3
Don't Know	16.1	16.4
<i>Where they reside</i>		
Residence hall	32.2	28.2
Off-campus apartment building	37.2	45.2
Other off-campus housing	29.0	0.6
Refused	1.6	0.6

Note that because all respondents, whether or not they owned or used a cell phone while walking alone at night, were asked this question, it needed the 'not applicable' option. Somewhat less safe was included to avoid leading respondents to one of the safer responses and because thieves target mobile phone users to steal the phone or something else (Briscoe, 2001; Harrington and Mayhew, 2001).

As part of a longer second survey, the interviewer asked the following question:

Which of the following have you done with a mobile phone?

- Don't have a mobile phone
- Reported a crime
- Reported an accident
- Reported a reckless driver
- Reported a hazardous situation (such as fire)
- Called for help in a non-crime situation
- Called for help in a crime situation
- Walked somewhere after dark, I wouldn't normally go.

Each survey also obtained information on the respondent's year of birth, ethnic heritage or national group, race, education, marital status, zip code, work, year in school, where the student resides, family income, citizenship and gender.

Table 2 If you carry a cell phone while walking alone at night, how does it affect your feeling of safety?

	Full Sample (n = 317) %	Cell phone owners (n = 196) %
1 A lot safer	12.0	19.4
2 Somewhat safer	35.3	57.1
3 Not more nor less safe	12.6	20.4
4 Somewhat less safe	1.9	3.1
5 Not applicable – Don't carry a cell phone	38.2	–

Table 3 Which of the following have you done with cell phone? (Yes, No)

	Total sample (n = 305)
Don't have a cell phone	13.4%
<i>Of those with a cell phone (arranged from most to least) (n = 264)</i>	
Walked somewhere after dark, I wouldn't normally go.	39.8%
Called for help in a non-crime situation	30.7%
Reported an accident	26.9%
Reported a crime	12.5%
Reported a reckless driver	8.3%
Reported a hazardous situation (such as fire)	8.7%
Called for help in a crime situation	5.7%

Results

The majority of students surveyed in the first survey (2001) reported carrying a mobile phone (61.8%). Only 38.2% indicated that they did not carry a mobile phone. One year later, the percent of the sample who did not have a mobile phone dropped to 14.4%.

Most of the students who carried a mobile phone reported feeling somewhat or a lot safer with it when walking alone at night (77.3%) (see Table 2). Their reported behavior shows a concomitant increased risk taking which could be related to the reported feelings of safety. Almost 40% of the students with a mobile phone reported that they walked somewhere after dark where they would not normally go (see Table 3).

As expected, females reported feeling a greater increase in safety with the mobile phone than did males. The comparison of safety scores across gender achieved statistical significance ($F [df, 1, 194] = 11.36, p < .01$) with females reporting higher perceived safety (1.91, s.d. = 0.62) than males (2.25, s.d. = .78). An examination of those who reported themselves feeling 'a lot safer' revealed a similar proportion of males and females in this group (approximately 12% of the sample). Other analyses related to affect of feelings of safety in relation to control variables revealed no significant difference related to year in school, race, year born, marital status, amount of time working, where the student resided (on or off campus) or family income.

Tests of differences between males and females in response to the second survey revealed two significant differences related to the mobile phone. A lower percentage of females (2.1%) than males (7.3%) reported calling for help after a crime ($X^2 = 6.45$,

2 *df*, $p < 0.05$), and a higher percentage of females (42.1%) than males (27.9 percent) reported walking somewhere after dark they would not normally go ($X^2 = 7.14$, 2 *df*, $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion

The results indicated that most of the college students used mobile phones, that most of them reported feeling safer when walking alone at night if they had it, and that the feeling of safety translated into walking places they would not normally go after dark. Furthermore, females reported a greater increase in perception of safety when carrying a mobile phone than did males and reported that carrying the phone may bring about a greater change in their behavior (as more of them than males said they were likely to walk somewhere after dark where they would not normally go).² In addition, use of the phone could increase their risk, since talking on a mobile phone has been found to reduce individuals' awareness of their surroundings and slow reactions to unexpected events (Parkes and Hooijmeijer, 2000).

Having a mobile phone may have had a positive role, in that 5.7% of the respondents said they used it to call for help in a crime situation; and others used it to report accidents or hazardous situations. In relation to use of the phone to call for help after a crime, perhaps the lower percentage among females than males relates to gender roles, status cues, and the higher likelihood for males to help than females (Eagly and Crowley, 1986).

In a look at the potential generality of the findings to other campuses, we conducted an independent survey of 100 students at an urban technological university. The results confirmed the general pattern of results. Most students reported that the mobile phone made them feel safer, and smaller percentages reported using it when feeling in danger, to report a stalled car or to report a crime or other emergency.

Future work could explore non-student mobile phone users to see if the results generalize to them, and could see whether the presence of a mobile phone in a group affects feelings of safety and the likely behavior of the group. It might study students and others *in situ* to measure actual behavior, rather than survey recall responses. In examining actual behavior, it could test whether students with mobile phones actually take part in behavior increasing their risk of victimization — such as going to unsafe places they would not otherwise go. It could test whether that behavior translates into increased victimization. It could explore how many students and others use their mobile phone to report or stop a likely crime. Research suggests that pedestrians talking on mobile phones have reduced awareness of their surroundings (Nasar *et al.*, forthcoming 2008). Additional research could test if mobile phone use makes pedestrians more likely to have an accident. With more data on actual implications of mobile phone use, we can know whether the assumptions of parents about the safety of their children (and the related claims of some mobile phone companies) are true or whether mobile phone users, like others facing risk homeostasis in relation to new technologies, need to take extra precautions to keep safe.

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2 The lower percentage of females calling for help after a crime seems inconsistent with those findings and results indicating a higher rate of personal crime victimization among females in college than males (Fisher and Wilkes, 2003).

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Résumé

En théorie, utiliser un téléphone portable peut avoir des effets positifs et négatifs. Les individus peuvent s'en servir pour appeler de l'aide ou signaler divers dangers et urgences, mais ils peuvent aussi aller là où ils n'iraient pas normalement sans leur portable. Pour tester les sentiments de sécurité et le comportement subséquent associé à l'utilisation du téléphone portable, nous avons réalisé deux études. L'une, sur 317 étudiants de 1^{er} cycle de la Ohio State University (OSU), a montré que la plupart des étudiants disaient disposer d'un portable et avoir la sensation, grâce à lui, d'être plus en sécurité la nuit. D'après une enquête complémentaire sur 305 étudiants de 1^{er} cycle à OSU, environ 40 % des étudiants ayant un portable ont déclaré que, avec celui-ci, ils se déplaçaient à pied dans des lieux où ils ne le feraient pas normalement. En revanche, une part plus restreinte a indiqué avoir utilisé son portable pour appeler de l'aide, que ce soit lors d'un crime ou non, ou bien pour signaler un accident, un crime, un conducteur imprudent ou une situation dangereuse. Les résultats suggèrent des conséquences favorables et néfastes dérivées du téléphone portable. Bien que son utilisation pour appeler de l'aide en cas de menace ou de crime, ou bien pour signaler d'autres risques, soit valable, la perception de sécurité renforcée qui lui est associée est susceptible d'entraîner les étudiants à avoir un comportement à risque, accroissant leur probabilité de devenir une victime. Un travail ultérieur devrait étudier si l'usage du téléphone portable accroît ou diminue la probabilité de victimisation et de capture d'un délinquant.