

(Aug. 12) -- After crashing his car into a double-decker bus in the new comedy "The Other Guys," Samuel L. Jackson's character offers a sarcastic apology to startled passengers.

"Sorry, I was texting."

The line is sure to elicit laughter from audiences because everyone knows what a nuisance drivers who text can be. But the only thing laughable about texting and driving is our laws against it.

Texting is rapidly becoming the biggest hazard on our roadways. **The National Safety Council**, a nonprofit that promotes safe driving, estimates that each year as many as 1 million crashes -- or 18 percent of all U.S. accidents -- may be caused by texting. Many of those are fatal. Given that cell phones have been common for only about a decade, it could get much worse.

And mounting evidence shows texting while driving is even more dangerous than driving drunk. Consider:

Texting increases the risk of a collision by more than 20 times, compared with those who aren't texting while driving, according to a 2009 study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute. By comparison, driving under the influence of alcohol increases the risk of a fatal crash by seven times, compared with driving sober.

Motorists who text have their reaction times deteriorate by 35 percent, a 2008 study by the U.K.-based Transport Research Laboratory found. Inebriated drivers only lose 12 percent reaction time. More Americans text and drive than drink and drive. In fact, 27 percent of drivers say they've texted while driving, compared with only 15 percent who said they've ever been DUI, according to reports from the Pew Research Center and the federal government.

Texting is a 24-7 problem as opposed to drunken driving, which usually occurs in the evening.

And as Hammonton, N.J., police Lt. Nick Salvatore notes, "A drunk driver is usually very concentrated on driving because they don't want to get caught. A texter, on the other hand, is less focused on driving."

Yet, while many states have begun adopting penalties for drivers caught texting, they pale in contrast to the harsh penalties imposed on drunken drivers. Typically, texters only pay a fine similar to a minor speeding offense.

In several states, the law applies to only teenagers, even though studies show adult drivers are just as likely to text. And 12 states still don't have laws against texting. Only Utah punishes texters like drunks, with offenders facing up to 15 years in prison.

True, laws invariably lag behind technology. Although automobiles became popular in the early 1900s, it wasn't until the '70s that government officials started to make an earnest effort to curb the spread of DUI across the U.S. As a result, fewer drivers now engage in the risky behavior and lives have been saved, studies show.

The public knows texting is as hazardous as drunken driving. A 2009 poll by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety showed that 87 percent of people consider texting while driving a "very serious" safety threat, almost equivalent to the 90 percent of those polled who consider drunken driving a threat. Yet, many of those same drivers surveyed also admit to doing it.

Relying on people to show good judgment isn't working. And implementing a ban is pointless if the penalties are so light as to be ineffective.

As with drunken driving, some drivers will continue to text and drive regardless of the legal consequences. But many offenders would stop if they knew texting could cost them their license or jail time, which are common penalties for drunken drivers.

Lawmakers should sober up and end the double standard.