

Every year, millions of Americans are forced to pay higher phone bills as the result of a practice known as “bill shock.” “Bill shock” occurs when cell phone customers unexpectedly receive phone bills that are significantly higher than their typical monthly bill. A May 2011 survey by *Consumer Reports* found that one in five Americans had experienced bill shock. Because of the especially high rate of cell phone usage among African Americans and Latinos, these communities are especially hard hit by this practice.

We call this “bill shock” because consumers can be charged hundreds or even thousands of dollars in unexpected fees and charges. Examples cited by FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski during a 2011 speech at the Brookings Institute include:

- A woman who was unexpectedly charged \$34,000 for international data and texting while visiting her sister in Haiti after the 2009 earthquake.
- A man who received an \$18,000 bill, without warning, after his free data downloads expired.¹

How does bill shock occur?

- Consumers can run up international roaming charges without realizing it, which can add up to thousands of dollars.
- Consumers can accrue high charges at a per-minute rate when they exceed the limits on their voice, text, or data plans.

- Consumers can accrue unexpected charges when a phone is used with Wi-Fi in “airplane mode.”
- Charges for mandatory data plans may be included with new phones and plans without the consumer being aware of them.
- Taxes and other fees may be assessed without the consumer being aware of them.
- Consumers may be confused about promotional rates, plans, and billing, and may receive unclear or inconsistent guidance from salespeople and customer service representatives.

What is being done about the practice?

It can be difficult for consumers to know when they’re running up a surprisingly high wireless bill. Several major wireless providers have committed to sending customers alerts when they are about to exceed monthly limits on voice, texting and data or if they are going to begin incurring international roaming fees.

Click [here](#) for more information on wireless usage alerts.

If you have tried to resolve a billing issue with your carrier and cannot reach an acceptable resolution, you may complain to the FCC. You can call the FCC’s Consumer Center, toll-free, at 1-888-CALL FCC (1-888-225-5322) (voice) or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) (TTY), or [file a complaint online](#).

¹ <http://www.fcc.gov/document/chairman-genachowski-remarks-bill-shock-event>