

Universal Motorcycle Helmet Use

Safe States Alliance Supports State Efforts to Develop, Maintain, and Strengthen Universal Motorcycle Helmet Laws.

Motorcycle safety helmet use has been repeatedly shown to reduce motorcycle crash-related injuries and deaths. The most effective strategy to increase helmet use is enactment of universal helmet laws. Universal motorcycle helmet laws require all motorcyclists to wear a Department of Transportation (DOT) approved safety helmet whenever they ride. While many studies have shown these laws to be an effective, life-saving strategy, many states have repealed or weakened their universal helmet laws. Between 2000 and 2012, national estimates show that motorcycle helmet use decreased from 71% to 60%,¹ and between 2000 and 2011, motorcyclist deaths increased by nearly 60%.² The Safe States Alliance can provide leadership and support to state-level efforts to maintain and increase passage of universal motorcycle helmet laws by:

- Providing states with technical assistance in developing advocacy messages for passing new and maintaining current universal motorcycle helmet laws and revising partial helmet laws (i.e. laws that only require specific groups of people, such as those below a certain age, to wear a helmet).
- Providing current technical studies and evaluation reports of motorcycle helmet law effectiveness and the fiscal and public health impacts of weakening universal motorcycle helmet laws;
- Supporting states in ongoing surveillance of motorcycle crash-related injuries and monitoring state helmet legislation; and
- Encouraging the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to promptly and widely distribute crash data and evaluation reports on motorcycle-related research to key decision makers; and work with NHTSA, the Governors Highway Safety Association, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to disseminate research on effective strategies for preventing motorcycle crash-related injuries and deaths in all states and territories.

Background: Universal Motorcycle Helmet Use Saves Lives

Morbidity, Mortality and Costs Associated with Motorcycle Crashes

In 2011, 4,612 motorcyclists were killed in crashes, accounting for 14% of all crash-related deaths; yet, motorcycles accounted for less than 1% of all vehicle miles traveled.³ Additionally, in 2011, there were another 81,000 motorcyclists who were non-fatally injured in crashes.⁴ The costs associated with these deaths and injuries are enormous. In 2005 alone, the economic costs associated with motorcyclist deaths totaled nearly \$7 billion in medical costs and productivity losses.⁵

Universal Helmet Laws Increase Motorcycle Helmet Use

States that completely or partially repeal universal helmet laws completely or partially experience sharp drops in helmet use and increases in motorcycle-related deaths, injuries, and costs. In 2000, Florida changed its universal helmet law to a partial helmet law that covered only riders aged 21 years and

younger and those with less than \$10,000 of medical insurance coverage. In the subsequent two years, helmet use fell from 99% to 53%, and the motorcyclist death rate increased by 21%. Hospital admissions of motorcyclists with injuries to the head, brain, and skull almost doubled. Deaths among motorcycle riders 21 and younger nearly tripled.

Conversely, helmet use increased and deaths fell in states that strengthened their laws, such as Louisiana (2004), which saw helmet use increase from 60% to 99%.ⁱⁱ

Helmets Save Lives, Reduce Costs

Motorcycle riders have different safety needs than people in other types of motor vehicles. For example, in a car the occupants are protected by front and side airbags, air curtains, seatbelts, and a rigid, crush-resistant passenger compartment with interior padding. However, motorcyclists have none of these protections. Reducing injury when crashes do occur means riders must wear protective equipment. This comes in two forms – helmets to protect the head and body “armor” (padded tear-resistant clothing, gloves, and boots) to protect the torso and extremities. Armor reduces minor injuries, but helmets help prevent death and life-long disability from brain injury.

Helmets are about 37% effective in preventing motorcycle deaths and about 69% effective in preventing brain injuries.⁶ It is estimated that helmets saved the lives of 1,550 motorcyclists in 2010.⁷ In addition to saving lives, helmet use reduces economic costs. In 2010, approximately \$3 billion in societal costs were saved as a result of helmet use in the United States.⁸ Another \$1.4 billion could have been saved if all motorcyclists had worn helmets.⁹ Improving helmet use rates is essential, as motorcycle ownership is at an all-time high with more than 8.4 million registered riders in the United States.¹⁰

Universal helmet laws are the most effective strategy to increase helmet use.¹¹ Compared with motorcyclists in states with a universal helmet law from 2008–2010, fatally injured motorcyclists in states with a partial helmet law were over five times more likely to be without a helmet, and fatally injured motorcyclists in states with no helmet law were over six times more likely. Economic costs saved in states with a universal helmet law were, on average, \$725 per registered motorcycle, nearly four times greater than in states without such a law (\$198).¹²

Universal Motorcycle Helmet Laws are Popular

Four out of five Americans favor helmet laws. Support for helmet laws is high in both states that require helmet use and those that don't. Further, support for motorcycle helmet laws is even high among the majority of motorcyclists.¹³

Young People Suffer Disproportionately in States with Partial Helmet Laws

In states with partial helmet laws, the majority of minors killed in motorcycle crashes were not wearing a helmet.¹⁴

Partial laws do not seem to be as effective as universal helmet laws at promoting helmet use among young riders. Studies showed that from 2008 to 2010, 60% of fatally injured minors were unhelmeted in states with partial helmet laws as compared to 22% in states with universal helmet laws.

Similarly, following the repeal of Florida's universal motorcycle helmet law, deaths of unhelmeted riders under the age of 21 (riders still covered by the law) increased 188%.¹⁵

Public Health Surveillance Improvements Can Quantify Effectiveness of Universal Helmet Laws

The need continues to maintain and provide national and state level data on motorcycle crash rates and trends. Surveillance efforts should include monitoring trends in death and injury along with enhanced surveillance to quantify health care costs by payer type, societal burden, the nature and type of injuries sustained in crashes, and the impact on youth. Comparing motorcycle crash-related injury, death, and cost data before and after helmet law changes should be included in policy outreach and educational materials to demonstrate the effectiveness of motorcycle helmet laws.

References

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