



 THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA

Motorcycle Helmets

This I-CAN report examines the arguments for and against motorcycle helmet regulations and summarizes current state motorcycle helmet laws.

Reasons For and Against Motorcycle Helmet Regulations

Motorcycles account for 2% of all registered vehicles and 0.4% of all miles traveled in the U.S., but motorcycle accidents account for over 9% of traffic fatalities.¹ Per mile driven, motorcyclists are about 32 times more likely to die in an accident than people riding in cars. In 2004, there were 4,008 motorcyclist deaths and approximately 76,000 injuries in the U.S.²

Head injury is a leading cause of death in motorcycle accidents. Motorcyclists without helmets are 40% more likely to experience a fatal head injury and 15% more likely to suffer a nonfatal injury in a crash than are motorcyclists with helmets.³

¹ Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. "Fact Sheets: Motorcycle Helmets." June 2006.
<http://www.saferoads.org/issues/fs-helmets.htm>.

² National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "Motorcycle Helmet Use Laws." January 2006.
<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/staticfiles/DOT/NHTSA/Rulemaking/Articles/Associated%20Files/03%20Motorcycle%20Helmet%20Use.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

In 2002, motorcycle helmet use is estimated to have saved \$1.3 billion in health care costs. It is estimated that an additional \$853 million would have been saved if all motorcyclists involved in fatal crashes would have worn helmets.⁴

It is sometimes argued that helmet use reduces peripheral vision and hearing, but studies have shown that helmet use has minimal effects on drivers' sight and that the effects on hearing are inconsequential because of the noise level of the motorcycle engine. One study suggested that helmets may increase the likelihood of neck injuries, but this has been refuted by over a dozen other studies.⁵ The primary argument against motorcycle helmet laws is that they violate the personal freedom of motorcyclists.

Current Motorcycle Helmet Legislation

Twenty states and the District of Columbia currently have laws requiring helmet use by all motorcyclists. Twenty-six states have laws requiring helmet use for motorcyclists under specific ages, with the most common age being seventeen. Four states, including Iowa, currently have no laws requiring the use of helmets by motorcyclists.⁶ Motorcycle helmet legislation is shown in Figure 1.

State Motorcycle Laws
Figure 1

	All Riders	Age Restrictions	No Laws
Alabama	X		
Alaska		17 and younger	
Arizona		17 and younger	
Arkansas		20 and younger	
California	X		
Colorado			X
Connecticut		17 and younger	
Delaware		18 and younger	
Florida		20 and younger	
Georgia	X		
Hawaii		17 and younger	
Idaho		17 and younger	
Illinois			X
Indiana		17 and younger	
Iowa			X
Kansas		17 and younger	
Kentucky		20 and younger	
Louisiana	X		
Maine		14 and younger	

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: Highway Loss Data Institute. June 2006.
http://www.iihs.org/laws/state_laws/helmet_current.html.

Maryland	X		
Massachusetts	X		
Michigan	X		
Minnesota		17 and younger	
Mississippi	X		
Missouri	X		
Montana		17 and younger	
Nebraska	X		
Nevada	X		
New Hampshire			X
New Jersey	X		
New Mexico		17 and younger	
New York	X		
North Carolina	X		
North Dakota		17 and younger	
Ohio		17 and younger	
Oklahoma		17 and younger	
Oregon	X		
Pennsylvania		20 and younger	
Rhode Island		20 and younger	
South Carolina		20 and younger	
South Dakota		17 and younger	
Tennessee	X		
Texas		20 and younger	
Utah		17 and younger	
Vermont	X		
Virginia	X		
Washington	X		
Washington D.C.	X		
West Virginia	X		
Wisconsin		17 and younger	
Wyoming		18 and younger	
TOTAL	20 States + D.C.	26 States	4 States

Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety: Highway Loss Data Institute June 2006.
http://www.iihs.org/laws/state_laws/helmet_current.html.

Effects of Motorcycle Helmet Use Regulations

Studies reveal that almost all motorcyclists comply with helmet laws immediately after the laws are implemented, but that compliance declines with time. In states with universal helmet laws, 90% of motorcyclists wore helmets in 2002, but only 79% wore them in 2005. In states without helmet laws, 53% of motorcyclists wore helmets in 2002, but only 46% wore them in 2005.⁷

⁷ Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "Motorcycle Helmet Use Laws." January 2006.
http://www.iihs.org/research/qanda/helmet_use.html.

Age specific motorcycle helmet use laws are extremely difficult to enforce. Data from states with age specific laws show that fewer than 40% of minors killed in motorcycle accidents were wearing helmets at the time of the accident.⁸

Death rates for motorcyclists are 20-40% higher in states without motorcycle helmet use laws or states with only age-specific helmet laws.⁹ One year after enacting universal motorcycle helmet use laws, the following states experienced reductions in motorcycle fatalities: California (37%), Maryland (20%), Nebraska (32%), Oregon (33%), Texas (23%), and Washington (15%).¹⁰

Public opinion tends to favor motorcycle helmet use laws. According to the 2000 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey, 81% of people 16 and older support motorcycle helmet laws. Support is higher among non-motorcyclists (83%) than motorcyclists (51%) and in states with universal helmet laws (84%) than states with only age-specific (75%) or no laws (79%).¹¹

This report was prepared in December, 2006 by the Iowa Civic Analysis Network (I-CAN), a non-partisan public policy undergraduate research group at the University of Iowa. For additional research on this or other issues, please visit our website at <http://www.uiowa.edu/~ican> or contact us at studorg-i-can@uiowa.edu

⁸ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "Motorcycle Helmet Use Laws." January 2006. <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/staticfiles/DOT/NHTSA/Rulemaking/Articles/Associated%20Files/03%20Motorcycle%20Helmet%20Use.pdf>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.