Motorcycle Helmets

The Facts of Life

Helmet Laws Make Sense

Fact: The value of motorcycle helmets in reducing deaths and serious injuries has been documented for more than 40 years.

Fact: Research has shown that helmets do not cause injuries, nor do they hamper vision or hearing. Yet without state laws that require helmet usage, too many motorcyclists will ride unprotected.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, some motorcyclists refuse to wear helmets and persistently oppose any helmet use laws. Their argument is that helmet laws are government interference, and that these laws infringe on the freedom to take risks and to gamble against death and permanent injury. But what kind of freedom is that? And who pays the price for those who gamble and lose? Families of the injured, as well as society at large (i.e., taxpayers) must bear the tremendous economic, psychological, and social costs involved in deaths and injuries to unhelmeted cyclists. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates more than $20 billion was saved from 1984 through 1995 because of the use of helmets. An additional $60 billion would most likely have been saved if all motorcyclists had worn helmets. The facts speak for themselves. Helmet use laws, like safety belt laws and many other traffic safety laws, make good, common sense for motorcyclists and the general public.
Helmet Laws Work

Even though helmets and helmet use laws are clearly effective in reducing motorcycle fatalities, these laws have been controversial.

In 1975, 47 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico had helmet use laws. But between 1976 and 1980, 28 states either weakened or repealed these laws. During that time motorcycle fatalities increased by 55 percent while motorcycle registrations increased by only 15 percent. The current trend is toward repealing existing helmet laws, however there are still only 25 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico that require all motorcycle riders and passengers to wear helmets. In 22 states, certain populations, such as minors, are required to wear them, and in three states there are no helmet use requirements.

Why the controversy over helmet laws? Some say that these laws restrict freedom, that they don’t work, or even that the helmets themselves are dangerous.

It is time to get the facts straight! Simply put:

- Motorcycle helmets save lives.
- Motorcycle helmets reduce the severity of injuries.
- State helmet use laws result in many more people using helmets, and when more people use helmets, the costs to family and society resulting from motorcycle deaths and injuries go down.
- When helmet laws are repealed, fatalities increase an estimated 20 percent.

Helmet Laws are Constitutional and Necessary

Helmet laws are constitutional. The highest courts in more than 25 states have declared helmet laws constitutional. Only one state supreme court (Illinois) ever invalidated a motorcycle helmet use law, and that court has since overruled its original decision. As well, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a Massachusetts law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets.

The question of whether motorcycle helmets should be worn involves much more than simply “freedom of choice” for the rider. America has long been committed to individual liberty, but even our society needs controls such as helmet laws that balance individual freedoms with public safety, health, and social welfare concerns.

Won’t people wear helmets on their own? Unfortunately, the answer is usually no. Surveys show that in states without helmet laws, only 34 to 54 percent of motorcyclists wear helmets voluntarily. In states that do have these laws, more than 80 percent of motorcyclists wear them—an enormous difference.

Helmet Do Save Lives

The evidence is overwhelming.

From 1984 through 1986, helmets saved the lives of more than 7,400 motorcyclists. If all motorcyclists and their passengers had worn helmets during those years, more than 6,200 additional lives could have been saved.

This data confirms numerous studies conducted in the United States, Great Britain, Canada, Japan, and Australia, that show how effective helmets are in preventing or reducing the severity of motorcycle head injuries. That’s why all of these countries have laws requiring motorcycle helmet use.

Motorcycle crash data have proven time and again that motorcycle helmets, when worn, reduce the risk of death in a motorcycle crash by 28 percent, and are 67 percent effective in preventing traumatic brain injury. Tragically, some crashes are so severe that they are fatal even if a helmet is worn. But no other piece of safety equipment can make as big a difference as the motorcycle helmet. As one safety researcher said, “Why not use common sense? If someone was going to hit you on the head with a baseball bat, would you rather have a helmet on your head or not? The answer is obvious, and the answer is the same for falling off your motorcycle and hitting your head on the ground.”