

02-01

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Universal Motorcycle Helmet Laws

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports the enactment of universal helmet laws, which require all motorcycle and moped drivers and passengers to wear helmets that meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 218.¹ In addition, NACCHO encourages the Department of Transportation (DOT) to reinstate incentives for states to enact universal motorcycle helmet laws in order to qualify for certain federal safety programs and highway construction funds.

NACCHO urges local health departments to work collaboratively with local and state partners to develop and implement comprehensive strategies to reduce motorcycle crash-related injury and death. Also, public health education should be directed toward increasing awareness about the risks of head injury and death from riding without an approved helmet.

Justification

Strategies to reduce motorcycle crash-related injury and death include traffic laws and appropriate enforcement mechanisms, motorcycle operating licensing and training, road conditions improvements, mechanical improvements to vehicles, clothing and motorcycle visibility improvements, efforts to reduce impaired driving, and educational programs and campaigns.^{2,3} Helmet use, however, is the only scientifically proven strategy to reduce motorcycle crash-related injury and death. The most effective strategy to increase motorcycle and moped helmet use is the universal helmet law.

In 2021, 5,932 people were killed in motorcycle crashes, accounting for 14 percent of all road traffic deaths.⁴ Per vehicle mile traveled in 2021, motorcyclists were about 24 times more likely than passenger car occupants to die in a motor vehicle traffic crash.⁵ Despite a steady decline in motorcycle-related deaths for the past 20 years, 2021 saw the greatest number in a decade.⁴ Helmets are estimated to be 37 percent effective in preventing fatal injuries to motorcycle riders and 41 percent effective for motorcycle passengers.^{6,7}

Analysis by the National Highway Safety Administration of data in 2021 examined state helmet laws and helmet use in fatal motorcycle crashes. Fifty-five percent of fatally injured motorcyclists were not wearing a helmet.⁸ These percentages vary drastically by state based on the presence of helmet laws. In 2021, in states without helmet laws, fifty-five percent of motorcyclists killed were unhelmeted, whereas in states with helmet laws, this figure is only 9%.⁸



DOT-compliant helmet usage in states requiring helmet use was 81.5% whereas in states without helmet laws usage was 56.1%.⁹ The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that in 2017, motorcycle helmet use saved \$3.5 billion; had motorcycle helmets been worn in all motorcycle crashes, an additional \$1.5 billion would have been saved.¹⁰ As of December 2023, 18 states and the District of Columbia have universal helmet laws, 29 states have partial helmet laws that require specific groups to wear helmets, and three states (Illinois, Iowa, and New Hampshire) have no helmet laws.¹²

The DOT requires that all helmets sold in the United States meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 218, which defines minimum levels of performance that helmets must meet to protect the head and brain in the event of a collision. DOT-approved helmets should weigh about three pounds, include a thick inner liner, sturdy chin strap and rivets, and must not allow anything to extend further than two-tenths of an inch from the surface of the helmet.¹³

References

1. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. *Motorcycle Helmets (FMVSS 218), 49CFR Section 571.218*. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://one.nhtsa.gov/cars/rules/import/FMVSS/index.html>
2. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2011). *Countermeasures that work: A highway safety countermeasure guide for state highway safety offices* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation.
3. Teoh. E.R. (2011). Effectiveness of antilock braking systems in reducing motorcycle fatal crash rates. *Traffic Injury Prevention*, 12(2):169–173.
4. National Safety Council. (n.d.) *Road users: Motorcycles*. National Safety Council: Injury Facts. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/road-users/motorcycles/>
5. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (n.d.). *Motorcycle safety*. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/motorcycles>
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Office of Policy, Performance, and Evaluation. (2022, May 9). *Motorcycle injury prevention: Interventions changing the context*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://www.cdc.gov/policy/hi5/motorcycleinjury/index.html#:~:text=What%20is%20the%20evidence%20of,head%20injury%20by%2069%20percent.>
7. Dept of Transportation (US), National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). *Traffic safety facts: Motorcycles*. Washington (DC): NHTSA; 2019. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812785>
8. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2023, June). *Traffic safety facts: 2021 data*. United States Department of Transportation. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813466.pdf>
9. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2022, March). *Motorcycle helmet use in 2021 – overall results*. United States Department of Transportation. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/Publication/813270>
10. Dept of Transportation (US), National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). *Traffic Safety Facts: Lives and Costs Saved by Motorcycle Helmets, 2017*. Washington (DC): NHTSA; 2019. Retrieved September 15, 2020 from <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812867>
11. Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. (November 2016). *Motorcycle Helmet Use*. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <http://www.iihs.org/iihs/topics/laws/helmetuse>.
12. Governors Highway Safety Association. (2023, March). *Motorcyclists*. Governors Highway Safety Association. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://www.ghsa.org/state-laws/issues/Motorcyclists>
13. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (n.d.) *How to identify unsafe motorcycle helmets*. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved December 19, 2023 from <https://one.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/motorcycle/unsafehelmetid/pages/page2.htm>

Record of Action

Proposed by NACCHO Injury and Violence Prevention Workgroup

Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors February 28, 2002

Updated July 2007

Updated July 2013

Updated November 2020

Updated February 2024