

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 2018, 4,985 people were killed in motorcycle crashes, accounting for 13.6 percent of all road traffic deaths.⁴ Per vehicle mile traveled in 2018, motorcyclists were about 27.3 times more likely than passenger car occupants to die in a motor vehicle traffic crash.⁴ Motorcycle-related deaths peaked in 2007 and 2008 and have been declining since 2016.⁴

Helmets are estimated to be 37 percent effective in preventing fatal injuries to motorcycle riders and 41 percent effective for motorcycle passengers.⁵ In 2017, helmets saved the lives of 1,872 motorcyclists; an additional 749 lives could have been saved had all motorcyclists worn helmets.⁶ A University of Southern California study, that analyzed 3,600 traffic crash reports covering motorcycle crashes, concluded that helmet use was the single most important factor in surviving motorcycle crashes.⁷



Analysis by the National Highway Safety Administration of data in 2017 examined state helmet laws and helmet use in fatal motorcycle crashes. Thirty-nine percent of fatally injured motorcyclists were not wearing a helmet.⁶ These percentages vary drastically by state based on the presence of helmet laws. In 2017, in states without helmet laws, fifty-seven percent of motorcyclists killed were unhelmeted, whereas in states with helmet laws, this figure is only 8%.⁶ According to a 2017 survey conducted by the National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS), usage of DOT-compliant helmet usage in states requiring helmet use was 87.0% whereas in states without helmet laws usage was 43.7%.⁶ 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.⁸

In 1967, the federal government required states to enact helmet use laws in order to qualify for certain federal safety programs and highway construction funds. The law resulted in nearly all states enforcing universal motorcycle helmet laws. However, in 1976, states successfully lobbied Congress to change the law and discontinue financial penalties for states without helmet laws.⁹

As of June 2020, 19 states and the District of Columbia have universal helmet laws, 28 states have partial helmet laws that require specific groups to wear helmets, and three states (Illinois, Iowa, and New Hampshire) have no helmet laws.¹⁰

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.¹¹

References

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Record of Action

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