Helmet Use Laws: They Work

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Helmet use laws are a rare find in the field of highway safety -- they are very nearly a magic bullet in our arsenal to reduce the deaths and injuries in motor vehicle crashes.

Research clearly establishes the effectiveness of helmets for reducing the risk of serious and fatal injuries in motorcycle crashes. In 1981, researchers at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety estimated that helmets reduced the number of fatally injured motorcyclists by 34 percent, meaning that about one in three deaths to unhelmeted drivers could have been prevented by the simple act of wearing a helmet.<sup>1</sup>

It is just as clear that laws that mandate the use of helmets are nearly universally effective. Figure 1 illustrates this point. In 1989, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration surveyed motorcycle helmet use in 19 cities across the nation.<sup>2</sup> Some of these cities were in states that required helmet use by all riders (the chart on the left of Figure 1), while others were in states that required helmet use by no riders or only some riders, typically those younger than 18 years.

As you can see, 98 percent of riders were helmets in the cities with laws covering all riders. Only 44 percent of riders were helmeted in the cities without laws or with partial laws.

In September of 1989, Texas strengthened its helmet use law to cover all riders. Prior to September, Texas required helmet use by only those riders under the age of 18. Motorcycle helmet use has been monitored by the Texas Transportation Institute semiannually in 18 Texas cities since June of 1987. The Insurance Institute collaborated with the Texas Transportation Institute to obtain additional helmet use observations during the month of August, just prior to the effective date of the law, and during the months of September and November, the first and third months of the law.<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 shows the results of these observations.

The effect of the law on helmet use was dramatic. From about 40 percent just prior to the law, helmet use jumped to 90 percent during the first month of required use. Subsequently, it has risen further, and stabilized, at about 95 percent of the riders.

We are not yet able to state what effect the Texas law has had on injuries and fatalities. It is noteworthy, however, that Texas also had a law covering all riders during 1968-77. During that 9-10 year period, it has been estimated that the law prevented 650 fatalities.<sup>4</sup> There is every reason to expect the new law to be just as effective. Data from other states indicate that helmet use laws can reduce motorcycle fatalities by about 25 percent.<sup>5</sup>

In Rhode Island, of course, there are many fewer r motorcyclist fatalities -- only 13 during 1989. But that was 13 percent of the motor vehicle crash fatalities in the state for that year. By comparison, motorcyclists accounted for only 9 percent and 6 percent of fatalities in Massachusetts and New York, respectively, which are neighboring states that require helmet use by all riders under 18 years of age. Motorcyclists accounted for a larger proportion of all motor vehicle crash fatalities (12 percent) in each of these states.<sup>6</sup>

Rhode Island does have a helmet use law, but as Figure 3 shows, it is unique. There are states that require all riders to wear helmets, states that require only those under 18 (or even younger) to wear helmets, and then there is Rhode Island, which requires only passengers to wear helmets. Interestingly, this feature of Rhode Island's law allows us yet another glimpse of the effectiveness of mandatory helmet use.

As shown in Figure 4, helmet use by passengers in Providence, Rhode Island was very high in 1989, 95 percent helmet as required by law. Among drivers, helmet use was only 62 percent. Again, helmet use is very high among those required to use them.

To sum up, the story of motorcycle helmet use laws is very simple: They work! At least, they work when they apply to all rides. Rarely in the field of highway safety does so simple an action result in such clear-cut benefits. One would think the obvious next step for Rhode Island would be to joint he other states with life-saving mandatory helmet use laws for all motorcyclists.

Of course, it's not nearly so simple. There is strong resistance to such laws among the people who have the most to gain, the riders themselves. Their resistance is not only persistent,

but it can be angry, as well. The following quote from an editorial on another aspect of motorcycle safety in one motorcycle magazine provides an illustration:

The forces behind this current onslaught of anti-superbike sentiment is still out there...That force, the Death Star, if you will, is the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Its tone is one that all who have worked to reduce motorcycle injuries will recognize. It's a tone reflecting the anger people feel when others place even trivial restrictions on previously free behavior. And, helmet use is not considered trivial.

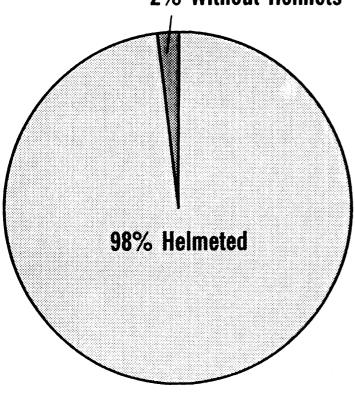
In dealing with such responses, it's important to remember that there are many restrictions placed on our driving freedom for our own and the public good. In addition, as noted by other presenters, the injured motorcyclists are not the only ones who suffer when they crash. Finally, many of the lives saved by mandatory helmet use laws will be young people just trying out or learning to ride their motorcycles. They ride without helmets not by conscious choice so much s the unavailability of helmets where they are not required. The people of Rhode Island must weigh these issues, but as they do, I hope it will be recognized that the proposal to save these people from unnecessary injury is not the action of Darth Vader's Death Star. It is simply the action of people who care.

## REFERENCES

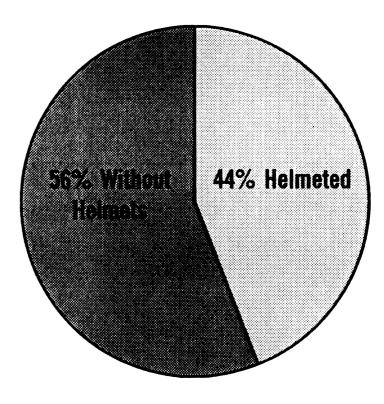
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## Figure 1 Motorcycle Driver Helmet Use in 1989 NHTSA 19-City Survey

2% Without Helmets



**Cities With Laws** 



Cities With No Laws
Or Partial Laws

Figure 2
Helmet Use in Texas
Drivers and Passengers on Motorcycles, Mopeds, and Scooters

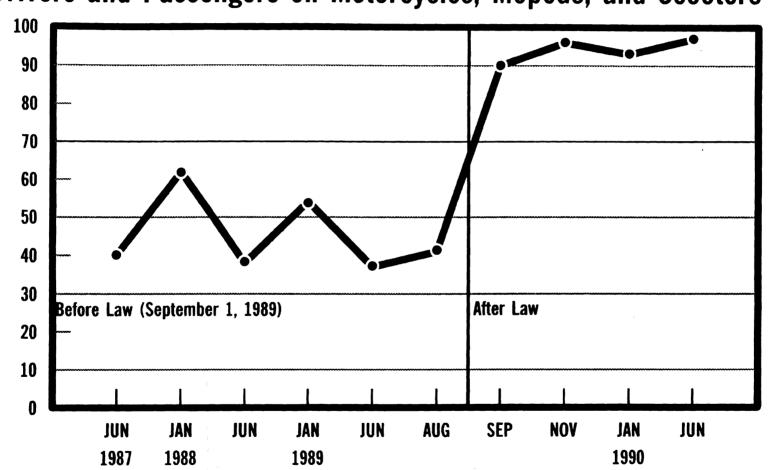


Figure 3

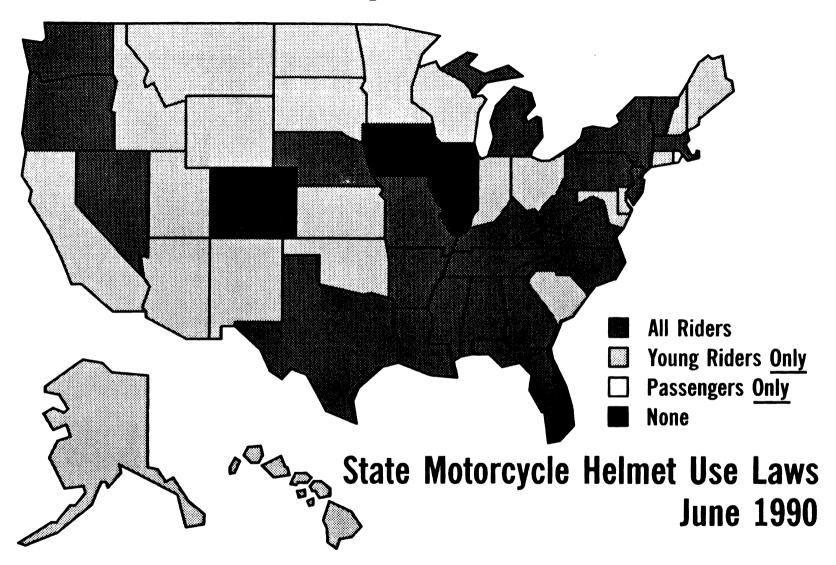


Figure 4
Motorcycle Helmet Use in Providence, RI
NHTSA 19-City Survey, 1989

