

A.B.A.T.E. of PA

POSITION

Mandatory Helmet Use Laws

POSITION:

The Alliance of Bikers Aimed Toward Education of Pennsylvania (A.B.A.T.E. of PA) encourages the voluntary use of motorcycle helmets along with other elements of a comprehensive approach to motorcycle safety.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA does not support laws mandating the use of helmet by responsible adult motorcycle riders and passengers. We do not oppose laws requiring helmets for inexperienced or minor riders.

Additionally, A.B.A.T.E. of PA does not support laws that place an economic requirement on the ability to choose whether to wear a helmet, such as laws requiring proof of medical insurance.

DISCUSSION:

From 1968 to 2003, Pennsylvania required all motorcycle riders and passengers to wear helmets. In September 2003, the helmet law was modified so that riders over the age of 21 who have been licensed to operate a motorcycle for at least two years OR are over 21 and have completed a state approved motorcycle safety course could choose whether or not to wear a helmet. Additionally, passengers of an exempted rider who are also over the age of 21 may choose whether or not to wear a helmet.

When the legislation modifying the helmet law was passed, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee was directed to conduct studies evaluating the effects of the legislation. The reports from these studies were published in 2006 and 2008. The reports show the following effects between the three years prior to modification of the law and the four years following the modification...

1. The motorcycle accident rate (accidents per 10,000 registrations) declined by 14.5%
2. The motorcycle accident fatality rate (fatalities per 10,000 registrations) was unchanged.
3. The motorcycle accident major injury rate (per 10,000 registration) declined by 3.8%.
4. The motorcycle accident moderate injury rate (per 10,000 registrations) declined by 12.8%.
5. Interestingly, motorcycle registrations increased by 69%.

A.B.A.T.E. of PA has been active in promoting helmet choice for experienced adult riders for over three decades. During that time, we've seen a lot of statistics tossed around that prove/disprove the effectiveness of universal helmet laws. We've tossed a few around ourselves. Which ones you see will depend on the objectives of the presenter. Which ones you believe depends on your preferred outcome. But we've learned that the only universal truth about the helmet law debate is that for every statistic, there's an equal and opposite statistic.

That is why A.B.A.T.E. of PA looks at the rates per 10,000 registrations (accident, fatality, major injury, and moderate injury). We can think of no other metric that measures the effectiveness of laws mandating safety equipment in such a brutally objective manner.

If a law mandating the use of a safety device is effective, the rates should improve. If it is not effective, they won't improve.

The outcome in Pennsylvania since the helmet law was modified is there's a lot more motorcycles on the road. But, an individual rider's odds of being in a motorcycle crash are lower. The odds of the rider being injured in a crash are lower. The odds of the rider dying in a crash remain the same. Overall, the rates actually improved in the absence of a mandate.

This is a pattern that we have observed in state after state across the country when helmet laws are relaxed. The opposite happens when helmet laws are made more restrictive. The pattern occurs without exception that we are aware of.

It can be argued with some merit that universal helmet laws reduce the total number of motorcycle accidents, fatalities, and injuries by discouraging ridership and reducing registrations even if the rates get worse (as history tells us to expect). But we do not consider this to be a rational argument in favor of universal helmet laws. This would set an ugly precedent in many areas of all our lives, for motorcyclists and non-motorcyclists alike.

At the bottom line, in the absence of a clearly positive effect from a law mandating a particular behavior or equipment, A.B.A.T.E. of PA remains opposed to such legislation.