

News For Thought



Increasing Fatalities Make Motorcycles a Target

As more people turn to two-wheel transportation, tripling the number of new motorcycles hitting the road over the past decade, the corresponding increase in motorcycle accidents and fatalities has made motorcyclists a target for stiffer regulations, stricter safety standards and select enforcement.

State and federal officials fear the problem could grow as higher gas prices push more first-time riders toward motorcycling without proper training and licensing. "With gas prices on the increase, more people are riding motorcycles to work," said South Carolina trooper Lance Cpl. Bob Beres. "They're not just using them for leisure."

Most motorcyclists who died during a recent 18-month period studied by the S.C. Highway Patrol either had a beginner's license or no license at all, and troopers worry that inexperience could put newer riders at greater risk. Of the 99 fatal motorcycle crashes they investigated from July 2006 to December 2007, 36 riders had beginner's licenses -- the same number as those with a regular license. Twenty-five had no license and two had expired licenses.

Motorcycle riders were at fault in about three-quarters of the fatal crashes. The major causes were speeding, failing to yield the right of way and driving under the influence. The S.C. Highway Patrol was awarded a \$75,000 grant to create a Ride Smart safety campaign aimed at motorcyclists, particularly beginning riders.

Law enforcement agencies nationwide are stepping up efforts to curb rising fatalities by targeting motorcycles. As part of a state funded Saving Lives program, the California Highway Patrol conducted a sweep of the 605 freeway looking for motorcyclists not obeying traffic laws, high handlebars and improper helmets, and will be keeping a closer eye on cyclists in highly concentrated areas through the summer.

They ticketed 62 motorcyclists, 21 of which didn't have a motorcycle license. Officers impounded the 21 bikes.

The National Coalition of Motorcyclists (NCOM) has recently taken the New York State Police and NYS Dept. of Motor Vehicles to task for setting up discriminatory "Safety Check" roadblocks for motorcyclists en route to large rallies, threatening a class-action lawsuit through Aid to Injured Motorcyclists (AIM), but meanwhile other states are taking similar targeted actions toward motorcycle riders under the pretense of safety concerns.

Bar Owner Accuses Police of Discrimination Against Her Patrons

A Green Bay, Wisconsin bar owner says the police department is discriminating against her because of her clientele. Kim VandenBusch says 75 percent of the regulars at Kimmers Bar & Grill are members of a motorcycle club.

Last week the city granted the owner a liquor license with a unique stipulation. The police department asked her to hang a sign in the bar that says "No club colors," referring to the back patches worn by motorcycle club members.

"I was very much under duress on signing that because they said if I didn't sign it I wouldn't get my license," VandenBusch told WBAY-TV, adding that it's unfair

because the bar has a good track record with the police department. "I felt it was very wrong. I felt it was discriminating. It should be up to the owner of the establishment to decide what clientele they want."

But the police department has every right to do this. Last year the city passed an ordinance that says every establishment wanting a liquor license must first have its business plan approved by the police department.

Police Captain Bill Galvin said, "There can be fights, shootings, drug dealing, drug usage, things like that occurring at places where these gang members hang out."

Galvin says putting up a simple sign will eliminate potential problems, but VandenBusch hasn't put one up yet. Instead, she's appealing to the Protection and Welfare Committee.

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US Traffic Deaths Drop to Lowest Level in a Decade

Traffic deaths in the United States declined last year, reaching the lowest level since 1994, reported the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Some 41,059 people were killed in highway crashes, down by more than 1,600 from 2006. It was the fewest highway deaths in a year since 1994, when 40,716 people were killed.

The fatality rate of 1.37 deaths for every 100 million miles traveled in 2007 was the lowest on record, NHTSA said in its report.

Motorcycle deaths increased for the 10th straight year. There were 5,154 motorcycle deaths last year, compared with 4,837 in 2006.

The increased deaths have come while the number of registered motorcycles has surpassed 6 million, compared with 3.8 million in 1998, and vehicle miles traveled have risen.

Transportation officials said they plan to target motorcyclists in a \$13 million anti-drunken-driving advertising campaign running during the Labor Day holiday. The department also has discussed new safety and training standards for novice riders, increased training for law enforcement and curbing counterfeit safety-labeling of helmets.

Oklahoma May Outlaw Gangs

State Rep. Paul Wesselhoft (R-Oklahoma City) told the Tulsa World newspaper that he wants to outlaw gangs by passing a law to enable gang members to be charged with a misdemeanor, even though he admits that such a law might not pass constitutional muster.

Tim Hock, vice president of the Oklahoma Gang Investigators Association, said he strongly endorses Wesselhoft's efforts, and that allowing gang members to be charged with a misdemeanor would give officers the means to interrogate them about criminal activity in the community.

Tulsa Police Chief Ron Palmer said, "There are various types of gangs -- outlaw motorcycle gangs, white supremacy groups, Asian, Hispanic and African American gangs." They can be identified by gang names, tattoos and, in some cases, the color of clothes they wear, he said.

But Andrew Spiropoulos, a law professor at Oklahoma City University, said lawmakers "have to be very careful when they legislate gang membership as illegal, because under the First Amendment, a person cannot be prosecuted because they are a member of a group."

He said a person can be prosecuted only for conduct. "Generally, what states and cities have done is that they usually attack some activity in addition to being a gang member," he said.

"This is very disturbing news," relayed Tiger Mike Revere, State Coordinator of ABATE of Oklahoma and member of the National Coalition of Motorcyclists (NCOM) board of directors, "We'll have to keep a very close eye on this one in Oklahoma, as this type of legislation passed in other states, as in California and Ohio, has been used to directly discriminate against and harass Motorcycle Clubs, and not just 1%ers."

Quoteable Quote: "I think legislative assaults on motorcyclists are totally emotional, disproportionate and totally unfair... They are instigated and implemented by people who know nothing about motorcycling, but have a prejudice. It's easy to curb the freedoms of others when you see no immediate impact on your own."