

South Florida Sun-Sentinel.com

South Florida motorcycle riders urged to wear helmets 10 years after helmet law repealed

More are wearing helmets but not close to levels prior to helmet law repeal

More than 10 years have passed since Florida repealed its universal helmet law requiring all motorcycle riders to wear a helmet.

In July 2000, the state stopped requiring adults to wear helmets, which led to a dramatic decline in helmet use. The number of motorcyclists wearing helmets dropped by half — from 99 percent of Florida motorcyclists in 1998 to 52 percent in 2002.

State traffic safety officials say the helmet could be making a comeback.

After focusing recent safety campaigns on getting motorists to be more aware of bikers on the road, state Department of Transportation officials are aiming a new message at motorcycle riders to get more of them to wear helmets.

Last year, a DOT survey found 55 percent of motorcycle riders wore helmets. In [Broward County](#), 55 percent of bikers wore helmets in 2010 compared with 49 percent in 2002. [Palm Beach County](#) also saw an uptick in helmet use from 44 percent to 47 percent during the same period.

"It's every important to emphasize helmet use because a good portion of motorcycle riders in crashes die from head injuries," said Chanyoung Lee, a senior researcher with the University of South Florida's Center for Urban Transportation Research.

In 2009, 29 percent of motorcycle crash deaths in Florida were related to traumatic brain injuries. Head injuries are the second most common injuries in motorcycle riders that require hospitalization.

Going without a helmet in Florida requires a motorcycle rider to have \$10,000 in medical insurance.

The median hospital charge for a biker admitted to a hospital after a crash in 2009 was \$53,613. About 49 percent of bikers' hospital stays and emergency room visits was not covered by insurance.

"It's a financial burden on all of society," said Dr. David Petruska, chief of neurosurgery at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Palm Beach. "Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public ends up taking care of the brunt of the cost."

Since 2009, motorcycle crash deaths have declined 30 percent — though Florida has one of the highest deadly motorcycle crash rates in the country.

State officials credit their safety campaigns targeting motorists and a 2008 law that required all motorcycle riders to take a motorcycle training course before receiving a motorcycle endorsement on their driver's licenses.

Those training courses emphasize protective gear.

Ray Vega, a motorcycle riding instructor with the Safety Council of [Palm Beach County](#), spends a considerable amount of time in his classes making a case for using helmets. He tells his students how his helmet saved his life.

"I have enough good information to convince them it's worth it," he said. "And most will go out and get a helmet."

DOT surveys show sport bike owners are more likely to wear helmets than owners of cruiser or touring motorcycles.

Vega favors reinstating a universal helmet law.

"That will bring our death rate down," he said.

However, Johnny Rose, president of motorcycle club ABATE of Florida Southeast Chapter, doesn't think that freedom of choice should be taken away from motorcycle riders.

The decline in motorcycle crashes in recent years came from safety campaigns, not more motorcycle riders wearing helmets, he said.

"[Motorcycle] registrations were up and deaths down because of our safety and awareness campaign," Rose said. "We finally proved to everyone it's not wearing a helmet that's killing us."

ABATE played a key role in getting Florida's universal helmet law repealed.

Dave Amchir, head of the Wings of Gold Motorcycle Club in Fort Lauderdale, said that wearing a helmet should be up to individuals.

However, anyone in his motorcycle club is required to wear a helmet. And he sees more people willing to do that.

"I'm seeing people who were against wearing them and had a close call and now wearing them," he said.

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