

New Data Finds Motorcyclist Fatalities Down 5.6% in 2017

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Motorcyclists Remain Overrepresented in Traffic Deaths

WASHINGTON, D.C. – A new report from the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) projects that 4,990 people were killed on motorcycles in 2017. This number, based on preliminary data provided by State Highway Safety Offices (SHSOs), represents a projected 5.6% decrease from 2016 – a difference of 296 lives.

In spite of this reduction, motorcyclists remain significantly overrepresented as a proportion of all traffic deaths, with motorcyclist fatalities occurring 28 times more often than passenger vehicle occupant fatalities per mile traveled. This is a stark reminder that much work remains to establish a lasting downward trend.

Motorcyclist Traffic Fatalities by State: 2017 Preliminary Data provides an early look at current data, trends, and developing issues. All 50 states and the District of Columbia contributed their preliminary motorcyclist fatality counts for the full 2017 calendar year. Compared with 2016, motorcyclist fatalities decreased in 30 states, remained the same in two states, and increased in 18 states. The report was authored by Tara Casanova Powell, an independent researcher previously affiliated with Preusser Research Group and the Traffic Injury Research Foundation.

According to Casanova Powell, “Motorcyclist fatality numbers have fluctuated from year to year over the past decade, so while we are cautiously optimistic about this projection, we really need to see a sustained trend downward toward eventually eliminating motorcyclist fatalities altogether.” She notes that the particularly strong 2017 Hurricane season may have led to fewer motorcycle riders on the roadways, pointing out that “clearly, we can’t – and shouldn’t – rely on bad weather to prevent motorcyclist deaths.”

State responses indicate a variety of factors may have been contributing to motorcyclist fatalities in 2017, including:

Alcohol impairment: 25 percent of motorcyclists involved in fatal crashes in 2016 had a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) over the legal limit, the highest percentage of any other vehicle type. State data signal that this trend continued in 2017.

Drug impairment: With recreational marijuana legalized in several states, there may be a higher number of drivers and motorcyclists under the influence of drugs. Marijuana impairment is known to increase a person’s crash risk, and a 2017 Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) study found that overall vehicle collision claims in states with legalized recreational marijuana were three percent higher than would have been expected without legalization.

Distraction: Several states reported an increase in distracted riding fatalities in recent years, with one state (Virginia) recording more than double the number of distracted riding fatalities from 2016 to 2017.

An aging riding population: Riders over the age of 40 now comprise the greatest share of motorcyclist fatalities nationwide, a shift from a previous overrepresentation of younger riders in fatal crashes. The average age of motorcyclists killed nationally in 2016 was 43 years old, and one third of states reported that the majority of their 2017 motorcyclist crashes involved older riders.

States employ a number of strategies and programs to reduce motorcyclist deaths and injuries on U.S. roadways. Recently, more states are looking to ignition interlocks – which prevent a motorcycle from starting if alcohol is detected on the rider’s breath – as an approach to reduce alcohol-impaired riding in the same way these lifesaving devices have proven so beneficial when installed on passenger vehicles.

As GHSA Executive Director Jonathan Adkins noted, “To continue moving the needle toward zero motorcyclist deaths, the traffic safety community must consider implementing these and other new approaches to improve rider safety, at the same time reinforcing what we already know works, including advocating for universal helmet laws.”

The recently published Road to Zero Vision for Achieving Zero Roadway Deaths in 2050 calls for just such an approach. The report calls on the traffic safety community to double down on proven countermeasures, such as helmet laws and ignition interlocks, in order to prevent both motorcyclist crashes and the tragic injuries and fatalities that too often result.

The full report, including state-by-state data and infographics, is available at:
ghsa.org/resources/spotlight-motorcyclists18

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The Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) is a nonprofit association representing the highway safety offices of states, territories, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. GHSA provides leadership and representation for the states and territories to improve traffic safety, influence national policy, enhance program management and promote best practices. Its members are appointed by their Governors to administer federal and state highway safety funds and implement state highway safety plans. Contact GHSA at 202-789-0942 or visit www.ghsa.org. Find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GHSAhq or follow us on Twitter @GHSAHQ.

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