

Motorcycle Licensing: Evaluation of Current Practices and Recommendations for Improvement

Motorcyclists account for a disproportionate number of annual traffic fatalities in the US, and there appears to be little relief in sight. While past efforts have largely focused on motorcycle helmets, rider impairment and operator training, research examining the effectiveness of these countermeasures has often limited to produce tangible outcomes due to various reasons.

Another potential area of focus, improving motorcycle licensing procedures, has received comparatively little attention from traffic safety stakeholders in recent years despite being identified as a prospective focal point by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

Although licensing procedures for passenger vehicles are relatively consistent throughout the U.S., motorcycle licensing requirements vary considerably across state lines. States differ with regard to tiered licensing practices, rider education and testing requirements, permit restrictions, etc. Some studies have found that more restrictive licensing elements (e.g., requiring a skills test to obtain a permit) are associated with reductions in the motorcyclist fatality rate. However, research in this area is limited and somewhat out of date, which hinders the ability to assess best practices.

Potential changes to motorcycle licensing procedures seldom gain any form of traction, as most states lack the financial resources and/or motivation to investigate best practices themselves. Even with procedures varying widely across the U.S., the status quo tends to remain intact and no clear direction has been established for improvement. As was concluded by the NTSB, motorcycle licensing practices have not been sufficiently evaluated with regard to their effectiveness and impact on rider safety.

The objective of this research is to evaluate the current state of practice for motorcycle licensing in the U.S. and develop recommendations for improvement based on the latest empirical data. Key to this objective will be to conduct a comprehensive literature review that highlights what it is already known about motorcycle licensing procedures in the U.S., as well as knowledge and best practices from other countries. It will also be necessary to develop an up-to-date list of motorcycle licensing procedures and requirements for all states. The research shall examine trends in motorcycle crashes, injuries, and fatalities at the state level, and break down licensing systems into their individual components to determine which types of procedures may have the greatest impact, and which are relatively ineffective. Specific focus shall be placed on examining practices related to online training, graduated licensing, and adult licensing.

To obtain a better understanding of changes in traffic safety stakeholder perspectives in each state, a survey could acquire feedback regarding potential roadblocks to change, as well as desired outcomes. Information obtained from previous steps shall be used to develop recommended guidelines for motorcycle operator licensing to address the license application process, permit restrictions, graduated licensing procedures, testing, licensing renewals, and training requirements.

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