

Illinois in the middle of the road nationally on traffic safety

By [Kaitlin Washburn](#)
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A new report finds the state needs to boost highway safety with motorcycle helmet requirements, child passenger safety rules and teen driving regulations.



A new report on road safety gives Illinois high marks for distracted driving rules and automated speed enforcement. But there is room for improvement: In 2022, more than 1,200 people died in traffic crashes in Illinois, up from 1,010 in 2019. Pat Nabong/Sun-Times (file)

Illinois gets a mixed score in a new nationwide report on the strength of the state’s roadway safety laws.

[The report](#), by the group Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, rated each state based on whether it has certain traffic safety laws in place.

Illinois fell short for its lack of a motorcycle helmet requirement, child passenger safety rules and teen driving regulations, according to the report released Tuesday. The state drew good marks for having comprehensive distracted-driving laws and automated speed enforcement.

“For more than two decades, Advocates has issued this annual report to provide ways to prevent or mitigate crashes. It is a how-to guide and call to action for legislative and regulatory officials,” said Cathy Chase, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

Roadway fatalities consistently declined in the U.S. over three decades thanks to the adoption of regulations like speed limits and airbag requirements.

But over the last decade, the decline in deaths slowed, and since 2020, motor vehicle deaths have spiked, according to [the U.S. Department of Transportation](#).

In 2022, over 1,200 people died in traffic crashes in Illinois, according to data from the Illinois Department of Transportation. In 2019, 1,010 people died.

The Advocates report shows that roadway safety laws have not kept pace with growing safety problems, said Joseph Schwieterman, a DePaul University professor who studies public policy and transportation.

“It really seems to be getting worse year after year, yet we’re ignoring proven safety methods that work,” Schwieterman said.

The report identified 16 traffic safety laws proven to reduce crashes, injuries and deaths, Chase said. Illinois has eight of the 16 on its books.

“Illinois did well for enacting primary enforcement laws that require passengers in both the front and back seats to wear seat belts, which is the most important first line of defense,” Chase said.

The state also scored well on distracted driving for restricting cellphone use behind the wheel.

But the state is behind the curve on laws aimed at protecting motorcyclists and kids and teens in cars, the report’s rating found.

Motorcyclists

Illinois is one of only three states that doesn’t have a law requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets.

Helmet requirements are proven to reduce deaths and injuries, said Dan Petterson, the president of Skilled Motorcyclist Association—Responsible, Trained and Educated Riders.

“There’s a tremendous amount of research on the effectiveness of helmets. They do their job they’re designed to do, which is to protect an individual’s head and brain in a crash,” Petterson said.

States without helmet requirements see nearly 10 times as many un-helmeted motorcyclists die in crashes than states with such laws, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

In 2021, 174 motorcyclists died in crashes in Illinois, and 60% of them involved a rider without a helmet, the NHTSA showed.

“Helmet effectiveness and use is without a doubt scientifically proven to be safe,” Petterson said. “And the easiest, quickest and cheapest way to get people to use helmets is to have an all-rider motorcycle helmet use requirement.”

But a vocal minority of motorcyclists resist these laws and say a helmet requirement infringes on their rights, Petterson said.

Bolstering child, teen safety

The report determined Illinois could do more to keep child passengers and teen drivers safe on the road.

“These laws are less controversial as they’re about protecting younger passengers and teen drivers and passengers. Children can’t protect themselves, and teens are one of the most dangerous driving populations,” Chase said.

For example, Illinois does not require kids ages 12 and younger to ride in the back seat. Though the transportation department does recommend it under its child passenger safety guidelines.

The report also recommends the state bolster its [graduated driver’s license program](#) by requiring:

- Beginning teen drivers be 16 to obtain a learner’s permit. The current age in Illinois is 15.
- Teen drivers obtain at least 70 hours of supervised driving before getting their license. The state currently requires 50 hours.
- A nighttime driving restriction that starts at 8 p.m. The driving curfew for Illinois is at 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday and 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.
- Only family passengers ride with a teen driver without an adult in the car. Currently, for the first year of being licensed, a teen can only carry one person under the age of 20, unless the additional passengers are family members. After that, they can drive any amount of people of any age.