

## **Motorcycle Helmets and Helmet Laws: An Issue That Should Not Need Debate**

[Note: This is a reprint of an opinion that first appeared in the October 1, 2009, issue of the *Detroit Free Press*.]

Motorcycle helmets and all-rider helmet laws save lives and reduce injuries. It is sad this issue needs debate. It is irrefutable that 1) helmets protect the head and brain; 2) when riders wear helmets, injuries and deaths from crashes are significantly reduced; and 3) when an all-rider helmet law is in effect, almost every rider wears a helmet.

The protective value of motorcycle helmets is documented by nearly 50 years of research. Every reputable safety research organization in the world supports the use of helmets as a way to reduce injury, death, and economic costs resulting from brain trauma. Research also confirms that without an all-rider law, helmet use drops substantially.

A recent study by the University of Pittsburg found that in the two years following repeal of its motorcycle helmet law, there was a 32 percent increase in head-injury deaths and a 42 percent hike in head-injury-related hospitalization, even after taking into account the increase in motorcycle registrations. Additional research can be found at [www.smarter-usa.org](http://www.smarter-usa.org), the Web site of the Skilled Motorcyclist Association—Responsible, Trained & Educated Riders (SMARTER).

Despite this overwhelming evidence, the biker group ABATE lobbies against helmet laws. Although ABATE claims they represent all motorcyclists, documents posted on their Web site state their membership is “approximately 4,000.” This number is a small fraction of the 533,005 Michigan residents who have earned a cycle endorsement.

Wearing a helmet is not a freedom-of-choice issue; it is a safety issue. The Constitution and the amendments do not give individuals the “right to do as they please” to the detriment of other citizens. Governments have a positive role in ensuring citizen safety. To enjoy the privilege of driving a car, hunting deer, operating a “jet-ski,” or riding a motorcycle, one must comply with certain non-intrusive, life-saving requirements: buckle up, display hunter orange, put on a life preserver, or wear a helmet.

While ABATE’s claim of representing all motorcyclists is extremely frustrating to me, I am angered by their effort to garner support for their cause by creating and perpetuating myths that impede the education of motorcycle riders. It is **not** true that helmets cause injuries, prevent hearing traffic, reduce vision, or cause heat exhaustion. Valid research confirms these claims are false.

When the “freedom of choice” and “helmets do not work” arguments did not result in ABATE getting their way, they hit at Michigan’s soft spot. They claimed our all-rider helmet law cost our state a loss of tourist dollars. They paid a consultant firm to write a document to support their claim and distributed the document to our legislators. Now we have legislators publically stating that our helmet law costs the state tourist dollars based on a document ABATE paid to have written.

It is time for reasonable motorcyclists and the non-riding public to speak up. Tell your senator and representative (1) helmets and helmet laws work for their intended purposes and (2) repealing or weakening our helmet law will result in increased deaths and injuries.

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