

New Study: Motorcycle Deaths Decline Slightly But Concerns Develop

Fatalities decline overall by at least 2% but increase later in year

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- [A report released today](#) by the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) reveals that motorcycle fatalities declined in 2010 by at least 2 percent. Based upon preliminary data, GHSA projects that motorcycle fatalities declined from 4,465 in 2009 to 4,376 or less in 2010. The projection is based upon data from 50 states and the District of Columbia. The decline comes on the heels of a dramatic 16 percent drop in 2009, which followed 11 straight years of steady increases in motorcycle deaths.

[The new report](#) -- the first state-by-state look at motorcycle fatalities in 2010 -- was completed by Dr. James Hedlund of Highway Safety North. Dr. Hedlund surveyed [GHSA members](#), who reported fatality numbers for every state and D.C. While data are still preliminary, most states have reasonably complete fatality counts for at least the first nine months of 2010, enabling GHSA to confidently forecast that deaths will be at least 2 percent lower for the full year. Dr. Hedlund completed a [similar projection](#) for GHSA a year ago, noting a 16 percent decline in the first nine months of 2009, just one tenth of a percentage point off the final number of 15.9 percent.

GHSA is projecting declines in approximately half of the states, with notable declines in many. In Texas, for example, based upon data for the first nine months of 2010, motorcycle deaths are expected to be down 16 percent, while Oregon and Oklahoma are down 27 and 30 percent, respectively. In Oregon, [GHSA Vice Chairman Troy Costales](#) credits his state's progress to a strong training program and a new law strengthening penalties for riders who do not have a motorcycle-specific license. Costales adds, "Oregon has worked successfully with our motorcycle clubs, who are effective advocates for riding safe and sober."

While on the surface the national decline is good news, deeper analysis of the data reveals some areas for concern. First, 2010's decrease of at least 2 percent is far less than 2009's dramatic 16 percent decrease. Second, the 2010 decrease was concentrated in the early months of the year, with fatalities actually increasing by about 3 percent in the third quarter compared with the same quarter in 2009. Additionally, with the improving economy and surging gas prices, motorcycle travel is expected to increase, thus increasing exposure to risk. Finally, motorcycle helmet use dropped alarmingly from 67 percent in 2009 to 54 percent in 2010.

As part of the report, GHSA members were asked to suggest factors that may be influencing fatality changes in their state. [GHSA Chairman Vernon Betkey](#), director of Maryland's highway safety program, noted, "In my state, we suspect motorcycle fatalities increased 3 percent largely because of an unusual spike in crashes in one of our more rural counties. We are working closely with law enforcement agencies and highway safety partners in this area to address the issue. Additionally, Maryland has stepped up efforts in work zones to ensure motorcycle riders are as safe as possible, is placing more emphasis on training and licensure, and is increasing investment in the state's public information and education campaign."

GHSA's Member in New York, the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, attributes the increase in fatal motorcycle crashes in that state to a rise in motorcycle registrations and a longer and more favorable riding season. J. David Sampson, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the state's Department of Motor Vehicles said, "There was an extended riding season in 2010 due to less rain and warmer temperatures which led to an increased exposure to crashes. In addition, motorcycle registrations continue to rise as the baby boom generation rediscovers their passion for riding a motorcycle. New York State's Motorcycle Safety Program is working to combat the rise in fatal crashes by continuing to increase the availability of Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) training sites throughout the state."

In reviewing the national data, Chairman Betkey said, "While there is a lot of good news in this report, the increase in fatalities toward the end of year is a clear red flag. Just like with overall traffic deaths, a strengthening economy presents us with the potential for more tragedy on our roads. We are going to be

very aggressive in targeting our programs where they are needed the most. Additionally, we will continue to remind all roadway users that motorcycles are a legal and legitimate way of transportation and we all need to safely share the road."

To continue progress in reducing crashes, injuries and fatalities on the nation's roadways, the report urges states to focus their motorcycle safety efforts on:

- **Increasing Helmet Use:** Helmets are proven to be 37 percent effective at preventing fatal injuries to motorcycle operators and passengers. Helmet laws are the only motorcycle safety strategy to receive a five-star effectiveness rating in NHTSA's [Countermeasures that Work](#) guidebook for states. Alarming, helmet use declined dramatically in 2010, and [30 states still lack helmet laws for all riders](#).
- **Reduce Alcohol Impairment:** States should conduct high visible drunk driving enforcement that includes motorcyclists as well as implement training efforts to help police identify drunken motorcyclists.
- **Reduce Speeding:** According to the most recent data, 35 percent of motorcycle riders involved in fatal crashes were speeding. More than half of speed-related fatal motorcycle crashes did not involve another vehicle.
- **Provide Motorcycle Operator Training to All Who Need or Seek It:** While all states currently conduct training courses, some areas may not provide enough course openings at the locations and times convenient for riders.

All data in the report are preliminary, especially for the last few months of 2010. The report presents data through September. The counts are reasonably complete for 48 states and the District of Columbia that reported monthly data for this period. Arizona and California reported data for a shorter period.

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