



Motorcycle Crash Injury Laws Questions & Answers

- Q. Is it true that "no law" states have lower fatality rates than "law" states?**
- A.** This is *not true* for motorcyclists dying with head injuries, and no one claims that helmets protect against other life-threatening injuries. Motorcycle-related head injury death rates with partial or no helmet-use laws are twice those in states with comprehensive helmet use laws; ***head injury death rates per vehicle registration are lowest in states with full helmet use laws.*** States differ dramatically in riding seasons, quality of roads, speed limits and availability of emergency medical service and trauma care. Thus, the most important comparison is before and after motorcycle helmet legislation within states. Enactment of comprehensive motorcycle helmet laws have consistently shown substantial decreases in motorcycle-related head injury death rates, and motorcycle fatalities increase 28%-45% after repeal of mandatory helmet laws.
- Q. Do helmets obstruct peripheral vision?**
- A.** Helmets do not obstruct critical vision. The peripheral vision of normal human eyes range between 200–220° in width. The Department of Transportation standard requires helmets provide a visual field range of 210° in width. A University of Southern California (USC) study showed 90% of all motorcycles in crashes hit something that was within 60° of straight ahead or within a range of 120°.
- Q. Do helmets interfere with critical hearing?**
- A.** No, any sound loud enough to be heard over the noise of the motorcycle and the wind will be loud enough to be heard inside the helmet. Helmets reduce the loudness of both the sound of interest (e.g., a car's horn) and the motorcycle noise by an equal amount, but do not alter the ability to hear one over the other. No case of 900 on-scene, in-depth investigations in a USC study revealed a failure to detect critical traffic sounds, for helmeted or non-helmeted riders.
- Q. If motorcyclists are just hurting themselves, why not leave them alone?**
- A.** They are not just hurting themselves, they are hurting taxpayers as well. The constitutionality of a motorcycle helmet use law was challenged in a Massachusetts court and upheld in the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972. The opinion reads in part:
"While we agree with plaintiff that the act's only realistic purpose is the prevention of head injuries incurred in motorcycle mishaps, we cannot agree that the consequences of such injuries are limited to the individual who sustains the injury . . . The public has an interest in minimizing the resources directly involved. From the moment of the injury, society picks the person up off the highway; delivers him to a municipal hospital and municipal doctors; provides him with unemployment compensation if, after recovery, he cannot replace his lost job and, if the injury causes permanent disability, may assume the responsibility for his and his family's subsistence. We do not understand a state of mind that permits the plaintiff to think that only he himself is concerned."

Simon v. Sargent, 396 F. Supp. 277, 279
(D. Mass. 1972), Affirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court, 1972

Source: "Motorcycle Helmet Issue." Injury Prevention Network Newsletter. Trauma Foundation, San Francisco, California. Spring, 1991.