

Deadly days show that Idaho needs a mandatory motorcycle helmet law

BY THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Idaho requires all drivers and passengers in a car to buckle their seat belts. Our state requires children under 18 to wear a helmet when on a motorcycle. We mandate that all ATV users 16 and under wear a helmet.

But adult motorcycle riders get to put themselves and society at risk by not wearing helmets. And the rest of us pay the price.

Idaho needs to change that, by passing a law requiring all riders to wear a helmet. And Idaho will need a legislative champion willing to push a bill in the face of what will be tough opposition from passionate motorcyclists.

The period between Memorial and Labor days is often called the 100 deadliest days, and Idaho is proving that this year. Idaho has seen 15 motorcycle fatalities since Memorial Day.

On average, almost half of the serious motorcycle accidents are in summer. But helmetless riders are at risk year-round. Between 2011 and 2015, Idaho saw 118 motorcycle fatalities; just over half of those people were not wearing helmets. A little over half of those accidents involved only a motorcycle, not a car or a truck as a factor in the fatality.

There's a debate to be had over the proper role of government in telling adults how to live their lives. But there's little debate over the effectiveness of helmets, and the arguments are similar to those about seat belts, which we've required since 1986. No, they don't save all lives in all crashes. The rider who died in last Sunday's crash at Galena summit that involved five riders and three bikes was wearing her helmet.

But this summer's rash of accidents and fatalities has to prompt Idaho to take a new look at its law. The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the Centers for Disease Control and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration say that helmets work: They reduce the chance of death by 37 percent and the risk of head injury by 69 percent. And while helmet laws were widespread in the 1970s, today just 19 states mandate use by all riders (that's 28 states if, like Idaho, young riders are included).

Motorcycle advocates have been effective in making this an issue about freedom and government overreach, rolling back helmet laws across the country. Idaho pared back its laws to cover just children in 1978.

We understand the independence that motorcyclists seek. We understand that freedom-minded riders bristle at the heavy hand of government. We understand they are adults who don't want to be told how to ride.

We also understand that helmets don't prevent accidents, don't prevent all brain injuries and don't save riders from internal and other injuries.

But the small loss of freedom they represent is outweighed by the large benefit to riders involved in crashes, the families they love and support, and the larger society that can end up with the burden of caring and paying for victims and injuries. If a death involves a breadwinner, society can have to pick up the cost for public assistance and other safety-net benefits.

The CDC estimates that helmets saved 1,722 lives in 2015 alone, and would have saved another 740 riders if all motorcyclists had been wearing helmets. The estimated loss to crashes with helmetless riders totals \$1 billion a year, the National Center for Statistics and Analysis found in 2015.

We're all for preserving freedoms for adults when those freedoms don't impinge on others. But the costs of these preventable injuries is a cost to all of society.

Helmetless riders choose to live a riskier life, knowing that asphalt is unforgiving. But they also are choosing to impose part of that risk on the rest of us, when society is called upon to help a grieving family or injured riders survive the accident. The bikers' unilateral imposition of risk on the general public gives our lawmakers license to control that risk through tougher helmet laws.

Is there a way to guarantee riders freedom while also guaranteeing taxpayers and insurance-paying citizens they won't end up carrying the costs for lifetime costs for injured riders? We'd be willing to listen: Can bikers buy insurance policies that ensure that their lifetime costs are covered in case of a serious brain injury?

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For mandatory helmet law: Requiring helmets would save lives and money in Idaho

Helmets, of course, aren't the only way to be safe. Cyclists should outfit themselves properly and take classes like Idaho STAR to start or sharpen their riding. It's not like riding a bike: Cornering, braking and steering are different and demand that riders recognize their skill level. Newer, younger, out-of-practice riders may not be ready for Idaho's challenging winding mountain roads.

So yes, safety is much, much more than wearing a helmet. But that's where Idaho can start.

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