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VITAL SIGNS

Safety: Deaths Soar After Repeal of Helmet Law

By NICHOLAS BAKALAR Published: June 24, 2008

In 2003, Pennsylvania legislators repealed a law requiring motorcycle riders to wear helmets. Researchers who studied deaths and injuries over the next two years say that decision had lethal, and expensive, consequences.

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Changes in Motorcycle-Related Head Injury Deaths, Hospitalizations, and Hospital Charges Following Repeal of Pennsylvania's Mandatory Motorcycle Helmet Law (American Journal of Public Health)

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The researchers compared accident statistics from the two years before repeal with numbers from the two years after. After repeal, helmet use among riders in crashes decreased to 58 percent from 82 percent. At the same time, head injury deaths increased 66 percent and head injury hospitalizations increased 78 percent.

Meanwhile, total acute-care hospital charges for motorcycle-related head injuries increased 132 percent in the latter period, compared with a 69 percent increase in other injury costs. The study was published in The American Journal of Public Health.

Although motorcycle registrations also increased, the rate of crashes per 10,000 registrants remained the same, indicating that there was little change in driving habits, road conditions or the risk behavior of riders.

In 1975, the federal government stopped requiring states to have helmet laws as a condition of receiving federal highway money, and today only 20 states and the District of Columbia require helmets for all riders. "We hope that legislators take a look at the data," said the study's lead author, Dr. Kristen J. Mertz, an assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh, "and consider reinstating universal mandatory helmet laws."

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