

## Universal Motorcycle Helmet Laws

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### Issue

This report summarizes arguments for and against universal motorcycle helmet laws.

### Summary

Universal, or mandatory, motorcycle helmet laws require all motorcycle riders to wear helmets; partial helmet laws require only certain riders to wear them. Connecticut has a partial helmet law, requiring all motorcycle operators and passengers who are under age 18, as well as all motorcycle permit holders, to wear a helmet ([CGS § 14-289g](#) and [-40a\(b\)](#)).

Supporters of universal helmet laws argue that such laws significantly reduce the number of motorcycle-related deaths and injuries and the economic costs associated with them. Supporters include transportation safety and public health agencies and advocates, as well as some motorcycle riders associations focused on motorcycle safety (e.g., the Skilled Motorcyclist Association ([SMARTER, Inc.](#))).

Opponents argue that supporters' claims are overblown, and also that (1) such laws infringe on personal liberty and (2) a more comprehensive solution is needed to improve motorcycle safety, rather than the simple, "silver bullet" approach of a helmet law. Universal helmet laws are primarily opposed by motorcycle riders associations, such as the [American Motorcyclist Association](#) (AMA) and the Connecticut Motorcycle Riders Association. (For more, read the SMARTER and the AMA position papers [for](#) and [against](#) universal motorcycle helmet laws, respectively.)

## Arguments in Favor

### *Safety*

In 2013, the Community Preventive Services Task Force (CPSTF) examined evidence from 69 studies on motorcycle helmet laws and consequently recommended universal motorcycle helmet laws. (The CPSTF is an independent panel of public health and prevention experts that provides evidence-based findings and recommendations to the federal government about community preventive services, programs, and other interventions aimed at improving peoples' health. Its members are appointed by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).)

Specifically, the CPSTF found that implementing universal helmet laws led to substantial increases in helmet use and decreases in motorcycle-related deaths and injuries. By contrast, the opposite effects were seen in states that repealed their universal helmet laws. Although some opponents of motorcycle helmet laws have argued that they pose certain dangers to motorcyclists (see below), CPSTF noted that it did not find evidence that supported these claims, and it found some limited evidence that refuted those claims. (The full summary of CPSTF's findings is available [here](#).)

*"Evidence shows that universal helmet laws increase helmet use; decrease motorcycle-related fatal and non-fatal injuries; and are substantially more effective than no law or than partial motorcycle helmet laws, which apply only to riders who are young, novices, or have medical insurance coverage below certain thresholds."*

*-CPSTF on benefits of universal helmet laws*

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) periodically releases statistics on lives saved by motorcycle helmets. In 2015 (the most recent year available) it estimated that the use of motorcycle helmets saved an estimated 1,772 lives, and that an additional 740 lives would have been saved if all motorcyclists had been wearing helmets. For the same year in Connecticut, NHTSA estimates that helmets saved 12 lives and an additional 12 lives could have been saved if all motorcyclists wore them. (For more, see NHTSA's "*Lives and Costs Saved by Motorcycle Helmets, 2015*".)

### *Economic Costs*

Proponents of universal helmet laws argue that the costs of motorcyclists' injuries are not limited to individual riders, but impose economic costs on society more broadly. According to the [CDC](#), the estimated annual national economic burden of injuries and deaths from motorcycle-related crashes is \$12 billion, and that a substantial portion of the costs are paid by the public in the form of higher insurance premiums and taxes, as well as lost tax revenue. Specifically, the CDC notes that studies have shown that unhelmeted motorcycle riders (1) face substantially higher healthcare costs than

do helmeted riders and (2) are less likely to have health insurance and therefore more likely to have their expenses paid by government-funded health care. In addition, unhelmeted riders are twice as likely to suffer traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and the median hospital charges to motorcyclists with a TBI were 13 times higher than the charges for those who did not have a TBI.

NHTSA also periodically estimates the annual economic costs saved by the use of motorcycle helmets. According to NHTSA, in 2015, an estimated \$3.1 billion in economic costs was saved, and an additional \$1.4 billion would have been saved with 100% helmet use. In Connecticut, those numbers were \$29.7 million and \$29.9 million, respectively.

## Arguments in Opposition

### *Personal Liberty*

The AMA, as part of a comprehensive motorcycle safety program, encourages the use of protective equipment, including helmets, but opposes universal helmet laws. On its [website](#), the AMA states that “adults are capable of making personal safety decisions for themselves. Society's role is not to mandate personal safety, but rather to provide the education and experience necessary to aid adults in making these decisions for themselves.” Similarly, opponents of these laws argue that riding motorcycles without a helmet is just one risky behavior among many (e.g., smoking, drinking alcohol, poor eating habits), and believe that motorcycle helmet laws regulate motorcycle riding more heavily than other risks.

### *“Silver Bullet”*

Opponents of universal helmet laws argue that proponents see such laws as a “silver bullet” solution to motorcycle injuries and deaths, when, in the opponents’ view, focus should be on comprehensive, effective alternatives. The AMA notes that any motorcyclist involved in a crash is at considerable risk, regardless of helmet use. It believes that, rather than mandating helmet use, more focus should be placed on a comprehensive approach to prevent crashes in the first place, such as through rider education, motorist awareness campaigns, and improved licensing procedures. To support their argument, the AMA notes that, in 2011, (1) 22% of motorcycle operators involved in fatal crashes were operating without a license, (2) 37% of fatally-injured motorcycle motorcyclists had consumed alcohol, and (3) 49% of all fatal motorcycle crashes involved another vehicle.

*“Mandatory helmet laws do nothing to prevent crashes. Regardless of the protective equipment worn, any motorcyclist involved in a crash is at considerable risk. This makes it all the more vital to avoid a motorcycle crash in the first place, a strategy widely recognized and pursued in the motorcycling community.”*

*-AMA on need for comprehensive safety strategy*

## ***Safety of Helmets and Economic Costs are Overblown***

Some opponents of universal motorcycle helmet laws argue that wearing helmets may make riders less safe, by increasing the risk of neck injury, impairing riders' vision or hearing, or giving riders a false sense of safety. (The CPSTF and SMARTER state that the available evidence does not support these claims.)

Opponents also provide evidence to refute the claims of high economic costs, citing two studies that found that (1) motorcyclists relied on public funds less often than did automobile drivers and (2) automobile drivers and motorcyclists have their claims covered by insurance at an identical rate. They also argue that unhelmeted motorcycle crashes have an insignificant impact on U.S. healthcare costs, and treating motorcycle injuries accounts for a very small fraction of total healthcare costs.

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