

[back to article](#)



Motorcyclists Deaths' Rise by More Than 6 Percent

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WASHINGTON — The number of motorcyclist deaths jumped in 2007, accounting for nearly one in eight motor vehicle deaths, government safety officials said on Thursday.

Deaths of people in cars and trucks, on bicycles or on foot dropped by nearly 2,000 last year, pushing the overall death rate to a historic low. But deaths of motorcyclists surged 6.6 percent, to 5,154; 2007 was the 10th straight year of increase.

Experts say the trend is most likely to continue, as high gasoline prices will encourage some travelers to use their bikes more often, getting 50 miles for the \$4 gallon of gasoline instead of 20 in their cars.

"We have seen the total motorcycle participation in vehicle miles traveled go up," said Mary E. Peters, the secretary of transportation and a longtime Harley-Davidson rider.

"We might see more people moving to that mode of transportation," Ms. Peters said. "We might see that data skew."

Motorcycle ridership appears to be rising even as the total miles for all vehicles drops.

Total deaths in motor vehicle crashes in 2007 declined to 41,059, a drop of 3.9 percent compared with 2006. Deaths in cars fell 7.8 percent, and in light trucks 2.7 percent. Even alcohol-related deaths fell.

In recent years, the development of safer cars and improved highways has been racing against growing levels of traffic to keep the death rate steady. Last year the total miles traveled declined by about 0.6 percent, and total deaths dropped much more sharply. The number of deaths per 100 million miles of vehicle travel, dropped to 1.37, a historic low.

In 1966, the rate was above 5 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, and the number of dead was above 50,000.

Deaths on motorcycles hit a low of 2,116 in 1997. Since, they have risen 128 percent. Their share of crash fatalities has jumped to almost 13 percent from 5 percent.

The highway safety authorities say that about 75 percent more motorcycles are registered today than 10 years ago. They suspect each motorcycle is ridden more miles, but the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says it does not have a reliable measurement of use.

And, safety officials say, many of the riders are middle-age or older men who rode when they were young, gave it up as they raised children and have recently gone back to the bike. "They think they still have the same reflexes," said James Port, the safety agency's deputy administrator.

Yet ridership has probably become more dangerous mile for mile. One reason is a decline in the number of states requiring the use of helmets. According to the National Transportation Safety Board, in 1975, 47 states required all motorcycle riders to wear helmets, but now only 20 do.

At the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the organization that conducts independent vehicle crash tests, Russ Rader, a spokesman, said motor vehicle deaths would probably continue their decline into this year. "A drop in highway deaths is always the silver lining in a down economy," Mr. Rader said, with fewer trips to work and discretionary trips.

"We are the only industrialized country in the world where there is an organized effort to weaken or repeal motorcycle helmet laws," Mr. Rader said. "That definitely is a factor in the increasing deaths."

At the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, which is financed by the manufacturers, Tim Buche, the president, said a person killed on a motorcycle was 2.5 times more likely to be under the influence of alcohol than a person killed in a car and three times more likely not to have a proper license.

"There's risks in everything in life, but the risks can be addressed," Mr. Buche said, by training, licensing, riding sober and wearing protective gear.
