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EDITORIAL

We think: The Legislature needs to again make motorcycle helmets mandatory

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America's streets and highways are getting safer for motorists, unless your choice of transportation has two wheels.

Federal researchers found that traffic fatalities nationwide dropped by nearly 4 percent from 2006 to 2007. The welcome news includes Florida, where preliminary 2007 numbers show a similar decline.

Motorcycles are another story -- one with a grim plot line written, in part, by our state lawmakers.

Nationally, the number of bikers who died on U.S. roads increased by 317 in 2007. In Florida, the body count rose by 29 in 2007, continuing an upward spike that -- through no coincidence -- began in 2000. That's the same year lawmakers decided bikers 21 and older no longer had to wear helmets.

Since 1999, the last full year Florida had a mandatory helmet law, the annual deaths have risen some 250 percent. In the same period, the total number of vehicle fatalities in Florida rose by just 10 percent.

A federal-government study following the Legislature's repeal of the helmet law found the move not only was costing lives but was taking a financial toll to care for patients with traumatic head injuries.

It's inconceivable that lawmakers would continue to ignore the gruesome results. Louisiana didn't. That state's legislators repealed the mandatory helmet law in 1999 but reinstated it five years later because of the increased carnage.

And yet, Florida's legislators are unmoved, continuing to swallow the tripe dished out by a bikers' advocacy group that pressed for the repeal in 2000.

The group, which goes by the acronym ABATE, frames the issue as one of personal freedom, as if the Constitution's framers had in mind to jump on their Harleys without helmets so the wind could blow through their powdered wigs.

Please. Legislative bodies have a history of passing measures meant to protect the public. Some

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rules might seem silly, but others are perfectly reasonable, like seat belts and air bags for cars and helmets to protect bikers. Why not repeal mandatory seat-belt laws? Or turn signals?

Florida's cowardly lawmakers, who like to preach the virtue of personal responsibility, won't even require bikers who forgo a helmet to take responsibility for their decision by getting adequate insurance. Right now, a helmetless rider has to have a minimum of \$10,000 in medical coverage, which doesn't buy much time in intensive care.

It's true that more people are riding motorcycles, but that doesn't account for the staggering increase in the number of bikers dying on our roads. The Legislature's monumentally clueless decision to make helmets optional is partly to blame.

How many people must die before lawmakers undo the damage?

For complete chart, please see printed copy.

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