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Motorcycle Crashes Are On The Rise In Florida

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Special to the Tribune

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TAMPA - Despite the chunk of money Floridians were spending on gas the past few years, many said they could not change how much they drove.

So some changed the vehicles they drove instead, buying fuel-efficient hybrids and motorcycles. Nationwide, motorcycle registrations increased from 3.9 million in 1998 to 7.1 million in 2007, according to the National [Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#). Florida reported 582,000 in 2007.

And with the increase in registrations has come more accidents. [Motorcycle fatalities](#) accounted for about 13 percent of all vehicle [crash fatalities](#) in 2007, up from 5.5 percent in 1998, according to the highway safety administration. In Florida, 530 motorcyclists died in 2007.

Both the highway safety administration and the [Motorcycle Safety Foundation](#) report that after a crash, the drivers of [other vehicles](#) involved often say they never saw the motorcyclist or were unable to respond in time.

That's what happened to Hillsborough County Circuit Judge Rex Barbas.

Barbas, who has been riding for decades, was hit from behind a few months ago by a motorist who didn't see him braking. He suffered a [broken pelvis](#) and two herniated disks in his back.

[Barbas](#) said drivers don't look out for motorcycles on the road. Exacerbating this is drivers' tendencies to multitask- eat, text, talk and listen to the radio while driving, he said.

"It's like I'm invisible," [Barbas](#) said. "I know they're looking right at me, but they don't see me because they aren't looking for me. They're looking for cars."

The rise in [motorcycle crashes](#) has prompted lawmakers to revisit road safety concerns as the rate of crashes involving motorcycles has increased steadily over the past 10 years. Florida enacted a law July 1 that requires all new [motorcycle riders](#) to take a 15-hour safety course that prepares them for the road. Previously, the law applied only to riders younger than 21.

The course is offered at several schools and dealerships in the Tampa Bay area.

Harley-Davidson of Brandon has offered a Rider's Edge course for years. [Barbas](#) took the course in 1990, including the advanced course, and insisted his children take it, whether or not they chose to ride.

A grandfather clause in the law meant people who had a motorcycle endorsement on their license before July didn't have to take the class.

The highway safety administration designated May as Motorcycle Safety Awareness Month, part of a yearlong "Share the Road" campaign.

Some of the highway safety administration recommendations include allowing more following distance when behind a motorcycle, giving them the full lane and checking "blind spots" often.

[Barbas](#) said one way that driver awareness of motorcycles can be improved is by including it in driver's education courses. He also said motorcycles need to have brighter brake lights, louder engines, and handlebar streamers.

"Anything that would catch a driver's eye and make them pay attention," he said.

[MOTORCYCLE FATALITIES](#)

Motorcycle rider deaths accounted for 5.5 percent of all vehicle accidents in 1998. By 2007, that percentage had risen to 12.6 percent:

1998: 5.5 percent

1999: 6 percent

2000: 6.9 percent

2001: 7.6 percent

2002: 7.6 percent

2003: 8.7 percent

2004: 9.4 percent

2005: 10.5 percent

2006: 11.3 percent

2007: 12.6 percent

Source: National [Highway Traffic Safety](#) Administration

Brentin Mosher, Jason Kushner and Cynthia Roldan were University of South Florida journalism students. Keyword: USF Motorcycle, for a database of motorcycle accidents in the Bay area, an interview with Circuit Judge Rex Barbas and a map of training course