

Commentary

Motorcycles and Public Apathy

Last November I presented a brief paper before a medical group about motorcycle crashes and their deadly consequences.¹ Reaction from organized cyclists to the paper, or at least to news reports of it,² was fast and ferocious—a deluge of angry mail to me as well as outraged editorials in cyclist magazines.³ Some of the letters were dispassionate and objective, many were personally abusive (“bigot”, “meathead”, “un-American”), and a few were threatening.

The sources of the cyclists’ outrage were two points made in my paper, both reported in the general press. One raised the option of “banning” or limiting the use of motorcycles to the extent that their sizes, speeds, drivers’ ages, or other characteristics in crashes suggest them to be strongly associated with exceptionally large amounts of human damage that cannot otherwise be controlled. The other point referred to laws requiring the use of motorcycle helmets. I had described such laws, which existed in most states because of a federal requirement, as a demonstrably successful step toward reducing head injuries to crashing cycle drivers and their passengers.⁴

While mulling over the vituperation of American cyclists’ reaction to these two points, I happened to visit Europe on business and there found company. The Scandinavian countries, it turns out, are wrestling with the same problems raised in my paper. They have already adopted and are strongly enforcing motorcycle helmet use laws, and in Sweden work is underway to develop lighter weight helmets for mandatory use by “moped” riders and even bicyclists.⁵

As to motorcycle size and engine power, an inter-governmental agency advisory panel from four Scandinavian countries is urging strict power ceilings on *all* motorcycles and mopeds. (Finland, Sweden, and Norway already somewhat limit the sizes of engines in smaller model cycles). Light motorcycles are “to a great extent used by unexperienced young people with a generally great proneness to accidents,” so the panel has recommended that their legal power ceilings be adjusted downward “to the qualifications of the drivers and to the way of use, which primarily is short trips and pure leisure.” For heavy motorcycles, it has concluded that “a limitation of cylinder volume could have good results . . . the vehicles more and more are owned and used by young drivers” and their “capacities for speed and acceleration gradually have increased to a level which definitely exceeds what is reasonable in the light of qualifications and needs of most drivers.”⁵

American motorcyclists, at least the organized ones, are vehemently opposed to such ideas. Despite the huge, well documented amounts of human carnage being produced in their crashes, they insist that the problem is being vastly overstated by meddling experts and that anyway, it is nobody’s business but their own. This is not so. It is everyone’s business. We all carry the burdens of human and economic waste caused by damage to people that takes place in the commons—in this case, our streets and highways. We all have a right, *even an obligation*, to take steps to reduce the damage and its consequences.

What, then, are the nature, magnitude, and characteristics of human damage involving motorcycle crashes—damage whose price tag includes not only death but also life-time medical care for the permanently crippled, and is paid by all of us through taxes, insurance premiums, and voluntary contributions to medical and other causes? Here are some indicators:

- By the end of 1974 about five million motorcycles and mopeds were registered in the United States—up from less than one million a decade earlier. The numbers are increasing at better than 14 per cent per year.⁶

- About 3,500 people died in motorcycle crashes in 1974. For motor vehicles in general, fatalities leveled off in 1969 and had been dropping sharply since 1972; for motorcycles they have been increasing sharply since 1969.⁷

- Motorcycles accounted for only 3.7 per cent of all registered vehicles and less than two per cent of vehicle miles traveled in 1974, yet their riders accounted for 7.3 per cent of all motor vehicle fatalities, up from only 2.5 per cent in 1964.⁷

- Although the under-25 age group represented only one-third of a sample of all cycle owners studied in California, it accounted for two-thirds of the injured cyclists. (Police records may be seriously under-reporting motorcycle death and injury; fewer than 39 per cent of all injured cyclists were reported in official records examined in California). Young males carried by far the heaviest load of motorcycle crash, death, and injury.⁸

- Nine per cent of motor vehicle-related spinal cord trauma reviewed in California studies occurred to motorcycle riders, even though cycles accounted for only 6 per cent of motor vehicles registered in the study area. For the nation as a whole, close to 90 per cent of all motorcycle crashes result in injury or death, compared to 10 per cent of automobile crashes.⁸

- The more powerful the motorcycle, the greater the risk of death or injury to its rider.⁹

- Motorcycles kill pedestrians at about the same rate per registered vehicle as do smaller cars.¹⁰

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- States with helmet-use laws have experienced, on average, decreases in motorcycle-involved fatalities compared to those without such laws.⁴

- Driver education has not been shown to make a difference in motorcycle crash, death, or injury rates.¹¹

Since it shares in paying the costs of the mayhem, the public at large has a right to take steps to reduce it, just as organized cyclists have a right to argue (with facts rather than firebrands, it is hoped) against such steps. The cyclists are certainly exercising their right; the same cannot be said of the public.

At the insistence of organized motorcycle interests, the Congress is repealing a 10-year old law empowering the U.S. Department of Transportation,¹² through a federal funding program, to see that every state adopts and enforces a motorcycle helmet-use law. Most states have long since complied, so most motorcycle riders now enjoy helmet protection as a matter of law. Yet very vocal cycle groups have been able to persuade Congress, in the prevailing atmosphere of distrust for government, to forbid DOT from exercising this public health authority. State governments are now being pressured by cyclists to repeal helmet-use laws. Some, unfortunately, will knuckle under. (South Dakota already has; it repealed its law early this year.)

Nor is the government considering, let alone taking, steps to limit the power, driver age, or other characteristics of motorcycles that are shown to be heavily associated with high amounts of death and injury. The data describe the problem and also the options for reducing it. Yet, were an official American advisory panel to come out with recommendations such as the Scandinavian intergovernmental advisors have published, it would be pilloried by cyclists and their publications, and few voices would be raised in its behalf.

Daniel P. Moynihan wrote many years ago in *The Reporter* that it is in the nature of public health problems that they "arise so naturally out of the environment that the population affected usually accepts them as inevitable and will even resist efforts to do anything about them."¹³ Motorcyclists may resist proposals to stop the carnage, but their arguments of "individual rights" are hollow. As a Massachusetts court told a cyclist objecting to the state's helmet-use laws (and the U.S. Supreme Court later affirmed):

"While we agree with plaintiff that the act's only realistic purpose is the prevention of head injuries incurred in motorcycle mishaps, we cannot agree that the consequences of such injuries are limited to the individual who sustains the injury . . .

The public has an interest in minimizing the resources directly involved. From the moment of the injury, society picks the person up off the highway; delivers him to a municipal hospital and municipal doctors; provides him with unemployment compensation if, after recovery, he cannot replace his lost job, and, if the injury causes permanent disability, may assume the responsibility for his and his family's subsistence. We do not understand a state of mind that permits plaintiff to think that only he himself is concerned."¹⁴

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Motorcycles Not Authorized for State Errands

The State of California will not authorize the use of privately-owned motorcycles on state business or reimbursement for mileage to an employee if a motorcycle is the mode of transportation. The State Board of Control reasoned that the high risk of motorcycle travel far outweighs fuel savings.

A Department of General Services study pointed out that, in 1973, the highway patrol reported an injury cost of 16.1 cents per mile for motorcycles, as compared to .59 cents per mile for automobiles. "This enormous variance in costs is due to the medical and disability costs of the cyclist operators," the report stated. "The high risk to the employee fully justifies the state as an employer in discouraging the use of privately owned motorcycles on state business."