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Americans have romanced the motorcycle for generations. Those powerful two wheels have been the symbol of rebellion, independence and, let's face it, sexy coolness. Keep the leather chaps, replace the horse with horsepower and you have the modern cowboy on his metal steed. Way cool.

Not cool is what has happened to the growing number of Americans using motorcycles for transportation. The U. S. Governor's Highway Safety Association released a report in June showing a truly alarming increase in the number of motorcycle deaths. While many Americans may be saving gas by switching from four wheels to two, far too many are losing their lives in the process.

According to the report, 2006 was the ninth straight year of increasing motorcycle deaths. The number of Americans killed in motorcycle accidents more than doubled from 2,110 in 1997 to 4,810 in 2006.

Motorcyclists were not at fault in all these fatalities but, just as it is true in vehicular deaths, being in the right doesn't make you any less a fatality. Being smart, informed and careful is the best way to keep you from becoming another sad statistic.

The study, which looked at state motorcycle safety programs, highlighted the need to educate operators of all motor vehicles; for the public; lawmakers and law enforcement; even engineers designing roadways. Not enough people, even motorcyclists, are taking necessary precautions to ensure the safest ride for everyone on the road.

The study showed only 21 states and Puerto Rico actually consider motorcycle traffic when designing new road construction and making adaptations and changes to current roadways. This is true even though motorcycle traffic is increasing and motorcyclists and their riders are vulnerable to hazardous road conditions.

Laws governing motorcyclists are widely different from state to state. The minimum age can vary from 14 to 18. More than half the states waive license testing for motorcycle operators who pass an approved training course. Automobile operators are not allowed the same waiver.

Helmet laws offer the most disparity among states. Less than half of the states have universal helmet laws, most have partial laws and three have no law covering helmet use. This is true even though most current statistics show helmets, like seat belts, save lives.

Laws may not be enough if compliance and enforcement are not stringently upheld. In 2006 alone, 25% of motorcyclists involved in fatal accidents did not have a valid license. This is compared to 13% of automobile drivers who did not have valid licenses and were involved in fatal accidents during the same period.

Education is key. Most states are overwhelmed by the increase in motorcycle ridership. Some new owners may wait up to 12 weeks for approved training courses.

Ray Ochs, Director of Training Systems for the Motorcycle Safety Federation agrees there is more need for education – of both motorcycle riders and motor vehicle drivers.

“We see several reasons for the increase in traffic accidents,” explains Ochs. “There is more traffic – both motorcycle and vehicle – and people are making bad choices when on the road.”

“When it comes to drivers, they are not looking for motorcyclists and they are not focused on what they are doing. Driver distraction is a huge reason behind the higher number of motor accidents.”

Just as the study showed, Ochs believes more needs to be done by the states and lawmakers to encourage and educate both motorcyclists and drivers. People on the road need to recognize riding and driving as skills requiring constant attention and adaptation.

What if riders and drivers don't heed the warning and work to become better educated and prepared? Then as the number of both motorcyclists and drivers increase, so will the number of accidents and the fatalities associated with them