

Pennsylvania has had a motorcycle safety program for riders for over 25 years. But with increased motorcycle ownership and ridership statewide, there is a need for better safety awareness among drivers of all types of vehicles that share the road – not only motorcycles, but also cars, trucks and other vehicles.

The recent increase in motorcycle ownership and ridership in Pennsylvania has been significant. In 2008, there were 390,283 registered motorcycles in Pennsylvania and 816,535 people licensed to drive them. In 2009, those figures went up to 393,042 and 828,245, respectively.

Motorcycle Safety Program

To move up from a learner's permit to a motorcycle license, it is necessary to go through the Pennsylvania Motorcycle Safety Program (PAMSP). Depending on skill level, participants can choose either the Basic Rider Course or the Experienced Rider course.

The Basic Rider Course covers topics that include protective gear, riding skills, turning and hazard avoidance. The Experienced Rider Course emphasizes skill enhancement in cornering, braking and swerving.

For all the benefits of this training, however, there is a key limitation. Currently, the safety training available for motorcyclists is aimed only at them, not more broadly at raising the awareness of all drivers on how to share the road safely.

For motorcyclists, getting the drivers of other vehicles to be more aware of motorbikes and help prevent motorcycle accidents is often a matter of life and death. Motorcycle fatalities have increased markedly in recent years, from 156 in 2003 to over 200 in each of the last three years.

Some commentators attribute part of this increase in fatalities to Pennsylvania's repeal of its mandatory helmet law in 2003. Helmets are now required only for motorcyclists with learners' permits, those who are under 21, and those who are over 21 but have not completed a safety course.

Others who look at the data are not convinced that increased fatalities are due to repeal of the helmet law. The motorcycle advocacy group known as ABATE – Alliance of Bikers Aimed at Education – attributes the increase in fatalities to the increase in ridership.

Broader Public Awareness Needed

Road safety depends so much on the safety awareness of drivers of all sorts of vehicles. Motorcyclists cannot do it alone, without the cooperation of the drivers of cars, trucks and other vehicles. For this reason, the Pennsylvania state police are working on creating a new safety program designed to promote broader public awareness about the need for all types of vehicles to share the road safely.

