

# Baby boomers drive motorcycle sales, safety concerns

Even experienced riders need to brush up on skills

By Deidre Bello

**T**he image of a middle-aged John Travolta riding cross-country on a motorcycle in search of freedom is likely not what comes to mind when most people think of the typical rider, but it represents a growing trend in motorcycle ownership.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Irvine, CA-based Motorcycle Industry Council, the motorcycle rider population has seen growth in the last few years among all age groups, but particularly within the baby boomer generation – those born between 1946 and 1964.



Photo: NHTSA

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One can only speculate why so many are taking to the road, but Lance Oliver, spokesperson for the Pickerington, OH-based American Motorcyclist Association, and other experts say it is likely because of the increase in re-entry riders – those who rode in their 20s and who now are in their late 40s to early 60s. This age group often has more disposable income or more free time because their children have grown up, he said.

“That’s one of the major forces at work here and it has fueled a second boom of motorcycle sales,” Oliver said.

Whatever the reason, the rise in motorcycle ownership continues

to bring a correlating rise in motorcycle fatalities. That is why experts are concerned with the boomer group and are stressing that new and re-entry riders need to know a lot has changed since the days when the movie “Easy Rider” best defined the cycle culture.

According to a preliminary report from the Department of Transportation, motorcycle rider fatalities are projected to increase for the ninth year in a row. NHTSA data from 2005 shows motorcycle fatalities have increased more than 125 percent since 1997. Some 4,533 motorcyclists were killed and an additional 87,000 were injured in traffic crashes in 2005. That’s up 13 percent in fatalities and 14 percent in injuries from 2004.

Although motorcyclists account for only 2 percent of the vehicles on the road, they are involved in more than 10 percent of all crashes. Fatalities have more than doubled in 10 years and now account for more than 4,500 highway deaths and 78,000 injuries each year, with the motorcycle crash rate in the 50-plus age group having increased by more than 400 percent.

#### New challenges

Ray Ochs, director of training systems for the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, said riders today face more challenges: traffic

In 2005, almost half of fatally injured motorcycle riders were **older than 40**.

Source: National Safety Council

#### The Motorcycle Safety Foundation's five primary points for motorcyclists:

1. Get trained and licensed
2. Wear protective gear
3. Ride unimpaired
4. Ride within your limits
5. Be a lifelong learner

is more congested, bikes have more power and require more skill and training, the intoxicated motorist is still out there, and increased cell phone use is producing more distracted drivers. On top of that, riders need to be aware of physical and mental changes. Older riders have diminished physical skills, such as slower reaction time and less acute vision, Ochs said.

“A returning rider that rode many years ago needs to recognize the difference in motorcycles and traffic and in themselves,” he said.

In recent years, high demand for motorcycle safety classes has caused the Motorcycle Safety Foundation’s spring classes nationwide to fill up quickly, Ochs said. The foundation’s curricula is offered at more than 1,900 training locations nationwide and used by the military worldwide. Since 1973, more than 4.1 million motorcyclists have enrolled in a Motorcycle Safety Foundation safety course.

In an effort to address new trends in rider demographics and safety concerns, the

Irvine, CA-based foundation continues to develop courses geared toward different rider groups. The foundation and the National Safety Council are working to develop a joint program that will give riders an online option for classroom curriculum.

### Going back to school

A challenge for some trainers is persuading the older motorcyclist who has been riding for years to take a refresher course. Even experienced riders make common mistakes – in addition to possibly retaining incorrect information from the past.

It's common for people to forget the basic rules of riding, said Brenda Hickling-Thatcher, president of Motor Maids Inc., an Erie, MI-based North American women's rider group. No one should be embarrassed about taking a training class, she said.

"Never think you've got it all – because once you think that, it's going to come back and bite you," she said. All riders should know their skill levels and ride where and when they feel comfortable, she added.

The American Motorcyclist Association's magazine, *American Motorcyclist*, devotes its April issue each year to articles on advice for how riders can hone their skills and

prepare for the spring and summer riding season, spokesperson Lance Oliver said.

"Some of it's common sense, but it's also remembering the basics of good skills," he said. Riding defensively is especially important, he added. According to NHTSA data, about one-half of motorcycle crashes involve another vehicle. Nearly 40 percent were caused by the other vehicle turning left in front of the motorcyclist. NHTSA advises drivers to always make a visual check for motorcycles by checking mirrors and blind spots before entering or leaving a traffic lane and at intersections.

### Wear proper safety gear

Motorcycle riding means increased vulnerability to other vehicles, even though motorcycle manufacturers have made safety improvements that include brighter headlights, improved disc brakes for more stopping power, stiffer chassis frames and tires with more grip. One manufacturer recently introduced a motorcycle with an airbag, which offers some protection in case of frontal crashes, Ochs said.

Motorcycle trainers, transportation safety groups and rider enthusiast groups like the American Motorcyclist Association promote use of helmets and protective

### Online training

The National Safety Council and the Motorcycle Safety Foundation have partnered to develop a Web-based motorcycle safety program for experienced motorcycle riders.

Soon to be released, the program addresses risk assessment, preparations for riding, street strategies and riding skills. The two-hour interactive program features exercises and full-motion video, and is fully narrated. Check the National Safety Council's Website at [www.nsc.org](http://www.nsc.org) for updated information.

clothing. NHTSA estimates that helmets saved 1,546 motorcyclists' lives in 2005, and that 738 more could have been saved if all motorcyclists had worn helmets. Only 59 percent of riders wear helmets today, down 13 percent from four years ago, according to the Department of Transportation.

At press time, 20 states and the District of Columbia had laws requiring all motorcyclists to wear a helmet, according to the Denver-based National Conference of State Legislatures. Twenty-seven states have laws requiring only some motorcyclists – usually riders younger than 21 – to wear a helmet. Colorado, Illinois and Iowa have no helmet restrictions.

Protective clothing helps riders to withstand the elements of hot and cold temperatures or rainy weather, in addition to helping them maintain dexterity in their limbs and hands, Oliver said.

### Riding sober still an issue

Because motorcycle riding can be a social event, safety advocates warn riders not to drink and ride. NHTSA data shows 41 percent of motorcycle operators who died in a single-vehicle crash in 2005 had a blood alcohol content level of .08 or higher; a higher percentage of motorcyclists died from drunk riding at these levels compared with other types of drivers.

"Alcohol is a big issue, especially when we see single-vehicle accidents involving motorcycles," Oliver said. "Riding is a demanding task and you need to be alert to do it, to have coordination and, most of all, your judgment."

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