

The perils of nostalgia: Older motorcyclists most likely to die in crashes

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When Ron Havens takes a road trip on his Honda Gold Wing motorcycle, he sees a lot of riders like himself - guys over 60 who rode when they were young and are back at it now that they're retired.

And some are not as skilled as they imagine.

"The people our age think we're really good riders and we don't take (safety) courses," said Havens, 73, of Springfield, Ill. "And the bikes are bigger now than what I rode in the '70s - bigger, faster, with more acceleration."

National statistics on [motorcycle](#) fatalities show a curious trend: Whereas in 1975, 80 percent of motorcycle fatalities involved riders 29 years old or younger, now the age group with the most fatalities is 50 and older, at 35 percent, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit [highway safety](#) research group funded by auto insurance companies. Ninety-one percent of those killed in 2015 were male.

The total number of motorcycle fatalities also has been rising - it accounted for 14 percent of all deaths on U.S. roads in 2016, with 5,286 fatalities, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration or NHTSA. This was 5 percent higher than 2015 and more than double the number from 20 years ago.

Why is the death toll growing among older people? There are a couple of

possible reasons, according to transportation and safety experts.

One reason is that they're a big part of the population - there were 76 million U.S. residents born between 1946 and 1964, and they are going to make up a large share of deaths whether it is 1975 or 2015, said Insurance Institute spokesman Russ Rader. People who once had Steppenwolf's "Born to be Wild" on vinyl have more time and disposable income now, and still like to ride motorcycles.

Rader said the improved economy has meant more overall traffic on the roads, which has meant more crashes for all vehicle types.

Another factor could be that some people who stopped riding when they were in their 20s to start families started riding again in their 50s or 60s, not realizing that their skills had eroded, according to state safety experts.

"We have older operators getting on these huge motorcycles and not being able to handle them. They're getting themselves killed," said Terry Redman, manager of the Cycle Rider Safety Training Program, a unit of the Illinois Department of Transportation. In 2015, the age range with the most motorcycle fatalities in Illinois was 50-54, with 23 deaths.

Similar trends are being seen in neighboring states.

"We call that age group 'retreads,'" said Sarah Buzzell, who manages the Wisconsin Motorcycle Safety Program, referring to riders who come back to motorcycles after a long break. She said that in 2016, motorcyclists aged 45-65 made up nearly half of the state's motorcycle fatalities.

"People don't realize their skills are perishable," Buzzell said. "They get on the road thinking they can do what they did at 20. Grip strength and

balance changes, and people tend not to take that into account."

"If you don't ride a bike for 30 years, you can't just jump on a Harley and go," agreed Bill Whitfield, highway safety director at the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Operating a two-wheeled motorcycle is generally more hazardous than operating a car, and one way to measure this is to compare actual time on the road.

The Federal Highway Administration collects information about the number of miles traveled by different vehicle types from the states. That number can be compared with fatality numbers to see which vehicle types see the most crashes. Per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, about 25 motorcyclists die and 451 are injured, compared with less than one death and 97 injured among those riding in passenger cars, according to the NHTSA. A motorcyclist is less protected than a car driver, and minor errors can lead to bad wrecks.

Patrick Salvi, Jr., a personal injury attorney with Salvi, Schostok & Pritchard, said smartphone use has meant more distracted four-wheel vehicle drivers and created a new source of peril for motorcyclists, who are already less visible in traffic.

The National Safety Council, an Itasca, Ill.-based safety advocacy organization, said about 8 percent of motorcycle fatalities in 2016 were related to a distracted operator, but of those only about 17 percent were the fault of the motorcyclist, as opposed to another driver.

Mark Barnes, 57, a Knoxville, Tenn., clinical psychologist, motorcyclist and author of the new book "Why We Ride," said older riders have slower reaction times, among other worries.

"They're going to be more vulnerable to things that affect all motorcyclists, like getting overheated, getting dehydrated, blood sugar fluctuations," said Barnes, who writes the column "Cycle Analysis" for Motorcycle Consumer News magazine. "They're also going to be less resilient to injuries."

Barnes said riding skills can atrophy even if you just put your motorcycle away for the winter - he had to stop riding for six months while recovering from a brain tumor and had to be careful getting used to the motorcycle again.

Barnes said one problem he sees is that older motorcyclists who realize their skills are lower will not ride as often, which ironically makes them less safe. "When you're riding occasionally, you're always rusty," Barnes said.

Another problem is alcohol. In 2016, 25 percent of motorcycle operators killed had alcohol levels of .08 or higher, compared with 21 percent of passenger car drivers, according to the NHTSA.

Unfortunately, drinking is part of the culture of some motorcycle groups, said Havens.

"These group rides go from bar to bar, or from winery to winery, or whatever it is they're doing, and then they go home," Havens said.

What can help riders? Transportation experts recommend taking safety classes to get your skills up. Illinois is one of only two states in the nation that offer motorcycle training for free, other than a \$20 refundable registration fee. The program is paid through a portion of motorcycle license plate fees. Redman said about 18,000 people go through the program on a typical year - you can sign up at startseeingmotorcycles.org.

Redman said it is tough to get some older riders to go.

" 'Oh, I know how to ride' is the response you get," Redman said. "The really conservative, the really careful people, they know the value of some training and realize that their skills are not what they used to be."

He encourages group rides to arrange meetups at parks instead of bars - with someone going ahead to bring a cooler full of ice water to ward off dehydration.

Redman, 63, went back to riding himself after a hiatus for kids and mortgage, but he rides a three-wheeled model - a Polaris Slingshot. "When we get older, we like to relive our youth," he said.

Also crucial for riders of all ages is good, protective gear, including a good helmet, Barnes said. Helmet use, which is not required in Illinois, saved the lives of 1,772 motorcyclists in 2015, according to the NHTSA. If all motorcyclists had worn helmets, another 740 could have been saved, the NHTSA said.

Barnes said older riders should sign up for gym memberships, as well as motorcycle training, since even sedate riding is a very physical activity and riders need to be in shape.

Despite the risks, riding a motorcycle can be a beautiful thing, which is why people want to keep doing it, no matter their age, riders say.

"It's exhilarating, it's fun and kind of Zen-like - you're focused," said Havens, who owns four bikes. "It's like a trance."

"I love the G-forces of acceleration and cornering and the freedom of being out in the environment, with all the sensory inputs that come with this," Barnes said. "I also love the camaraderie of other motorcyclists."

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