

Impaired Motorcycle Riding:  
Law Enforcement Officers Focus Group Results

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents the results of focus groups conducted in 1994 with law enforcement representatives in two sites. At that time, available data indicated that alcohol-related fatalities had declined for passenger car drivers, but similar reductions had not occurred for motorcycle operators. The purpose for conducting the focus groups was to obtain law enforcement insight on why alcohol-related fatalities had not declined among motorcycle operators and determine the role of law enforcement in reducing alcohol-related crashes among motorcyclists.

It is important to keep in mind that the results reported in this paper are based on feedback from 26 law enforcement officers in four focus groups. Focus groups are a qualitative research technique used to gain insight and understanding into the nature of a problem, and should not be used for statistical purposes or generalized to larger populations; focus group data are not survey data. Hence, the results reported in this paper cannot be generalized to all law enforcement officers.

Qualitative analyses provided information on the law enforcement beliefs about drinking and riding, as well as enforcement patterns. The results also suggested some lack of knowledge about rider training and licensing programs, as well as cues for detecting impaired motorcyclists. So far, results have been used to develop a roll-call video on detecting impaired motorcyclists. Plans are underway to develop another roll-call video on motorcyclist licensing.

## BACKGROUND

There are approximately four million registered motorcycles in the United States today and according to the Motorcycle Industry Council, there are about 6.6 million motorcycles and scooters in use today. More and more people are purchasing and riding motorcycles as evidenced by the continued growth in sales of new motorcycles. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council, motorcycle sales increased by about 28 percent from September 1999, to September 2000. Also, more and more motorcyclists are becoming trained; more than 1.8 million motorcyclists have completed rider training programs since 1973.

Unfortunately, statistics reveal that drinking and riding remains a problem for many motorcyclists. According to the *Fatality Analysis Reporting System*, motorcycle operators involved in fatal crashes consistently have higher intoxication rates, with blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) of .10 grams per deciliter (g/dl) or greater, than any other type of motor vehicle driver (Traffic Safety Facts: Motorcycles 1999). Table 1 compares the percentage of motorcycle operators with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl involved in fatal crashes with the percentage of passenger car drivers with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl involved in fatal crashes.

*If I don't have a drink before I get on my bike, I'm uncomfortable, because it is a lot of power underneath me and you definitely have to know what you're doing to ride this particular motorcycle. So I need a drink to help me go out there and ride. (Miami focus group participant.)*

Table 1

	Percent of Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes with BAC $\geq$ .10, 1982-1999																	
	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Motorcycle	41	41	40	39	41	38	36	40	39	39	36	33	29	29	30	28	30	28
Passenger Car	31	30	28	26	26	25	25	24	24	23	22	21	19	19	19	18	18	17

Source: Fatality Analysis Reporting System data

Table 1 shows that for each year from 1982 to 1999, the percent of motorcycle operators with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl exceeds the percent of passenger car drivers with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl., averaging a 12 percentage point difference over the 18 year period. From 1982 to 1999, the percent of motorcycle operators with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl involved in fatal crashes fell 13 percentage points from 41 percent to 28 percent (a 32 percent decline). During the same time period, the percent of passenger car drivers with such BACs fell 14 percentage points (a 45 percent decline). A closer look at the data shows that the decline is not parallel. For example, from 1982 to 1991, the percent of motorcycle operators with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl involved in fatal crashes fell 2 percentage points (from 41 percent in 1982 to 39 percent in 1991), while the percent of passenger car drivers with such BACs fell 8 percentage points (from 31 percent in 1982 to 23 percent in 1991).

From 1991 to 1999, the decline in the percentage of motorcycle operators with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl involved in fatal crashes outpaced that of passenger car drivers (by about 8 percent). Over this time period, the percent of motorcycle operators involved in fatal crashes fell 11 percentage points (from 39

percent to 28 percent) whereas the percent of passenger car drivers fell 6 percentage points (from 23 percent in 1991 to 17 percent in 1999).

The data concerning the percentage of motorcycle operators and passenger car drivers fatally injured in alcohol-related crashes show similar trends. Table 2 presents data showing the percent of fatally injured motorcycle operators and passenger car drivers with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 g/dl.

Table 2

Percent of Fatally Injured Drivers with BAC  $\geq$  .10, 1982-1999

	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Motorcycle	42	42	41	41	42	39	37	41	40	39	37	34	30	30	31	29	32	28
Passenger Car	43	41	39	37	37	36	36	34	35	34	31	30	28	28	27	26	25	25

Source: Fatality Analysis Reporting System data

From 1982 to 1991, the percent of intoxicated motorcyclists with a BAC  $\geq$  .10 fell 3 percentage points (from 42 percent to 39 percent), while the percent of passenger car drivers with similar BAC levels fell 9 percentage points (from 43 percent to 34 percent). From 1991 to 1999, there was a slightly greater decline in the percent of fatally injured motorcyclists who were intoxicated compared to the percent of passenger car drivers who were intoxicated (11 percentage points vs. 9 percentage points, respectively).

In 1994, these data led the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to investigate why alcohol involvement in motorcycle crashes remained high even though the changes in impaired driving laws apply equally to all motor vehicle operators (except commercial vehicles), and public information and education campaigns have increased the public's awareness of the dangers associated with driving impaired. The agency had conducted similar research with four-wheeled vehicle operators but had not included motorcycle operators in the research.

To obtain insight into the drinking and riding problem, the agency conducted a series of focus groups with motorcycle riders who admitted to drinking and riding (Syner and Vegega, 2001). Focus groups were also conducted with law enforcement officers. The purpose of the law enforcement focus groups was to assess law enforcement attitudes about drinking and riding a motorcycle and to determine what factors are instrumental in enforcing impaired driving laws as these laws relate to motorcyclists. This paper presents the findings of the focus groups with law enforcement officers.

## METHODS

In April 1994, NHTSA awarded a contract to conduct focus groups to assess motorcyclists' attitudes and beliefs regarding drinking and riding.<sup>1</sup> Included in this contract was a requirement to conduct four focus group sessions with law enforcement representatives to assess law enforcement's attitudes and beliefs regarding impaired motorcycling.

Four focus group sessions were conducted; two in Miami and two in San Diego. Police officers whose traffic safety responsibilities included dealing with motorcyclists were recruited. A letter describing the project was sent to various police agencies in Miami and San Diego. Each agency was invited to send one representative to participate in the focus groups. State highway patrols, sheriff's departments, and metropolitan and suburban law enforcement agencies sent representatives. All had current assignments in traffic safety and were active in traffic patrols. Three-fourths of the officers rode motorcycles on the job and about 25 percent rode for recreation.

A trained facilitator engaged the participants in a discussion based upon a protocol developed to guide the discussion. The questions and wording in the guide were pretested with three traffic officers who all rode motorcycles recreationally. Where necessary, questions were refined.

The sessions were conducted in July 1994, and each one lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Four to eight officers participated in each session for a total of 26 officers across the four focus groups.

## FINDINGS

A qualitative analysis was used to summarize the discussion of the four focus groups. Readers must exercise care in interpreting the results presented below. Focus group findings provide insight into the nature of a problem and should not be generalized to all law enforcement officers. Focus group data are not survey data.

Law enforcement officers were asked to discuss their priorities in traffic enforcement. Speeding was the priority most frequently mentioned. More than 50 percent of the participants stated that it was their first priority because it was a frequent violation which could lead to serious crashes. Other priorities mentioned were driving under the influence by motorists, reckless driving, and right-of-way violations.

Apprehending impaired motorcyclists had a low priority for most of the officers participating in the focus groups. These officers did not view

*The number of bikers who get killed compared to drivers must be very small. We've only had one [death] within the past two years. (Miami focus group participant)*

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<sup>1</sup> The authors acknowledged the research conducted by Global Exchange, Inc., and Public Communication Resources, Inc., for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration under contract DTHN22-94-R-05047. The project's final report served as the primary resource for this article.

impaired motorcyclists as a serious problem because impaired motorcyclists are relatively few in number and tend to injure only themselves if they crash, rather than others on the roadway. Some of the participants felt that a motorcyclist who could get the motorcycle moving could probably ride it home without major difficulty. A few seemed to think that anyone foolish enough to ride a motorcycle while impaired deserved to suffer the consequences.

The law enforcement officers participating in the focus groups were asked to discuss rider behavior as it relates to alcohol. The participants generally agreed that, for certain kinds of motorcyclists, drinking was a part of the image and an integral part of the ride. According to the participants, there are very few social events that do not involve alcohol or drugs. Like other motorists who drive after drinking, the police officers in these focus groups believed that riders typically are unaware of their own impairment and their capabilities to operate a motorcycle safely. Some of the officers stated that with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) between .05 and .10 g/dl, many motorcyclists feel they are not impaired.

*The majority of drunk drivers [operators] think they've done nothing wrong. They didn't hurt anybody, "Why are you arresting me?" It's like the woman I popped the other day with a .23 [BAC]. She couldn't stand up to do any of the tests, but she was trying to come down on me, saying, she was going home, she didn't do anything, and why was I harassing her? (San Diego focus group participant)*

When asked if there had been an increase in drinking and riding, many of the officers responded positively stating there were more motorcycles on the road and motorcyclists usually drink. Although these officers were aware of widespread drinking by riders, they made very few arrests for impaired riding. The reason cited most often is, in part, the difficulty in detecting impaired motorcyclists. Motorcyclists also find it easy to avoid sobriety checkpoints according to the focus group participants.

The focus group participants were asked to describe the characteristics of impaired motorcyclists. Two groups were mentioned most often: young men on fast motorcycles and older, hard-core motorcyclists. The officers stated that males, aged 19 to 25 years, who ride high-speed motorcycles were the chief offenders. Officers participating in the focus groups also stated that older Harley-Davidson riders were heavy drinkers, especially those who belonged to clubs, and accounted for most of their driving under the influence (DUI) cases.

The officers participating in the focus groups were asked to discuss what they considered to be the strongest deterrents to reducing impaired motorcycle riding. The officers stated that the loss of, or possible damage to, a motorcycle was the strongest deterrent to riding under the influence.

*Losing the bike or physically stopping them from riding, either by impounding the bike or impounding the person [is the strongest deterrent]. We can deter somebody with the threat of taking their freedom: either their personal, physical freedom or the freedom they have with that motorcycle. (San Diego focus group participant)*

This result is similar to that obtained in focus groups with motorcyclists who admitted to drinking and riding (Syner & Vegega, 2001). This reflects the strong emotional attachment motorcyclists have to their motorcycles.

The possibility of injury or death resulting from an alcohol-related motorcycle crash does not concern motorcyclists according to the focus group participants. This concept is consistent with the beliefs of motorcyclists participating in similar focus groups (Syner and Vegega, 2001). Riding a motorcycle is inherently risky and motorcyclists do not seem to think that drinking adds to that risk.

According to the participants, many motorcyclists have little fear of being stopped and arrested for impaired motorcycling because they know if they flee at high speeds, law enforcement officers will not pursue them. The participants also suggested that motorcyclists show little concern about having their license suspended since many already ride without one. This is consistent with 1998 fatality data that show 32 percent of motorcycle operators involved in fatal crashes were unlicensed or improperly licensed compared to 10.8 percent of car drivers (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fatality Analysis Reporting System data, 1998). A number of officers mentioned that most riders have no idea how costly a DUI conviction can be.

When asked to describe what local measures are in place to reduce impaired riding, all departments represented in the focus groups conducted sobriety checkpoints but very few motorcyclists passed through these checkpoints. No department had any programs specifically aimed at motorcyclists. Among focus group participants, no major differences were noted between DUI laws for motorists and motorcyclists, but some officers suggested a lower BAC (perhaps .04 or .05) for motorcyclists.

The police officers participating in the focus groups were asked to discuss reasons why drinking and riding fatalities remain high. They stated that there are a lot more motorcycles on the road, especially young males, who are natural risk-takers. The officers believed that rider training and licensing requirements were inadequate and that there were no requirements to demonstrate knowledge or riding skills in order to buy a motorcycle. However, there was consensus among police officers that, with young riders, the primary problem was speed and lack of skills in operating a motorcycle at high speeds. In the view of these officers, more fatalities are caused by the inability to control high-speed motorcycles than by alcohol impairment. But they stated that when alcohol enters the scenario, the problem worsened. High-speed motorcycles combined with inadequately trained, inexperienced, young riders leaves no margin for error. A very small amount of alcohol may cause sufficient impairment resulting in a major crash.

Inconsistent treatment in the media was also suggested as a reason why impaired riding fatalities remain high. Many public information and education campaigns dealt with impaired driving and many of those emphasized intervening with friends or using a designated driver. In contrast, almost no media exposure has been devoted specifically to impaired motorcycling and certain interventions; namely, offering a ride or using a designated driver, are not typically available to motorcyclists.

During the discussions, four major deterrents to enforcing DUI laws as applied to motorcyclists became evident.

- No chase policies are in effect in many jurisdictions, so a motorcyclist sometimes can escape arrest simply by fleeing. All jurisdictions represented in the focus groups had some policy that

they will not engage in high-speed pursuit for a traffic violation because such a chase is dangerous for those involved, as well as for innocent bystanders.

- Most officers do not know how to recognize an impaired motorcyclist.
- Many officers believe that any rider who can get a motorcycle started and moving for a mile or more is probably okay.
- Officers do not regard motorcycles as posing a major threat to public safety.

The above factors combine to produce a kind of resignation on the part of some officers, who felt that DUI motorcyclists should have a low priority. The general belief was: “We can’t detect them (impaired motorcyclists); if we do, we can’t catch them; they will probably get home safely anyway; there aren’t many of them; they aren’t likely to hurt others on the road; and, if they do get hurt, it’s their own fault.”

The focus group participants were asked to suggest areas where enforcement improvements could be made. Some of their responses included:

- mandatory training classes for riders that would cover drinking and riding and other topics;
- requiring a license or permit from the department of motor vehicles in order to buy a motorcycle;
- emphasizing stricter enforcement, with stiffer penalties, for operator license violations;
- establishing minimum age limits for operating motorcycles of various (engine) sizes;
- placing sobriety checkpoints in areas with heavy motorcycle traffic;
- impounding motorcycles;
- producing public service announcements on drinking and riding as part of a drinking and driving public education campaign; and
- making an effort to get motorists to be more aware of motorcyclists.



## DISCUSSION

Some of the results of the focus groups with law enforcement officers were similar to the results of the focus groups conducted with motorcyclists (Syner & Vegega, 2001). For example, the officers participating in the focus groups believed:

- Drinking and riding often go together. Drinking was a routine part of motorcycling events.
- Motorcyclists typically are unaware of their own impairment and their capabilities to operate a motorcycle safely.
- The threat of injury or death was not an effective motivator for avoiding drinking and riding. The threat of damaging or losing a motorcycle through impoundment was probably a more effective deterrent.
- Most motorcyclists do not know how costly a DUI conviction can be.

Additionally, the focus groups with law enforcement officers provided the following unique results.

- Impaired riding was a low priority for the law enforcement officers participating in this research. Higher priorities included speeding, driving under the influence by motorists, reckless driving, and right-of-way-violations.
- No-chase policies are a barrier to apprehending impaired motorcyclists.
- Few participants had received training on how to detect impaired motorcyclists.
- No department represented had any programs specifically aimed at impaired motorcyclists.
- Unlike motorcyclists, the law enforcement officers believed that the legal BAC to operate a motorcycle should be lower (.04, .05) than for passenger car drivers.
- Alcohol was not considered a major problem in motorcycle crashes. The major concern discussed was the lack of skill to operate a motorcycle at high speeds. The officers believe these skills deteriorate with alcohol. Law enforcement officers who participated in these focus groups exhibited a lack of understanding of rider training programs or licensing requirements. However, they stated that to impact the impaired riding problem, there should be an emphasis on stricter enforcement of motorcycle operator licensing violations.
- Officers believe there is a lack of media attention given to impaired riding and that the public information and education efforts directed to impaired driving do not include impaired motorcycling messages.

- Officers suggested that impaired motorcyclists do not pose a major threat to public safety. According to the participants, if an impaired motorcyclist crashed, the harm is generally to the motorcyclist and to no other.

## CONCLUSION

These focus group results demonstrate a need to educate law enforcement officials on the dangers of drinking and riding as well as other issues regarding motorcycling. For example, the officers in the focus groups did not appear knowledgeable about rider training and licensing programs.

In 1992, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) developed and released training materials that law enforcement officers can use to detect alcohol-impaired motorcycle operators. These materials have been incorporated into the Standardized Field Sobriety Testing curriculum. However, at the time this research was conducted, few law enforcement officers appeared to know about these detection cues.<sup>2</sup> Recently (June 2000), a roll-call video on detecting impaired motorcyclists was produced and aired on the Law Enforcement Television Network. Besides reviewing the cues for detecting impaired motorists, the video also emphasized the inclusion of impaired motorcyclist enforcement with routine enforcement impaired driving activities. Currently, plans are underway to produce a roll-call video addressing motorcycle operator licensing.

In spite of these efforts, there remains a need to better integrate detection and apprehension of impaired motorcyclists into existing impaired driving programs and training. While research has shown that impaired driving messages need to target specifically motorcyclists to be effective, impaired riding activities and efforts also must become more integrated into ongoing impaired driving prevention efforts.

Law enforcement agencies can take an active role and impact the impaired riding problem. Perceptions of the dangers of impaired riding need to be changed, more law enforcement agencies need to conduct training specific to detecting impaired motorcyclists, and strategies need to be developed to implement more effective enforcement activities to reduce the number of impaired motorcyclists.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the officers in the focus groups participated in the study to develop the detection cues and mentioned this research.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results reported in this paper are based on focus group data, and care must be taken not to generalize to all members of a group. The law enforcement officers who participated in this study came from law enforcement agencies in Miami and San Diego and may not represent the practice of law enforcement agencies throughout the country. Focus groups are used to provide insight into the nature of a problem, and should not be used for statistical generalizations.

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