



An Examination of Washington State's Vehicle Impoundment Law for Motorcycle Endorsements

In July 2007, Washington State modified its vehicle code to clarify that its existing impoundment law for unlicensed drivers also applies to operators without specially endorsed licenses, including motorcycle riders, and expressly allows law enforcement officers to impound the motorcycles of unendorsed operators. To understand the effect of this law on motorcycle riders in Washington, the goals of this project were to examine:

- Any issues associated with the implementation of the law;
- Awareness of the law;
- Enforcement of the law, in terms of prevalence of impoundment and citations issued under the law;
- Effects of the law on endorsements;
- Effects of the law on riders taking safety training; and
- Effects of the law on crashes.

Implementation

Interviews were conducted with law enforcement officers and towing-company representatives, and they suggested that there have been no unforeseen problems caused by the impoundment law. When motorcycles are impounded, the process does not take an inordinately long time for either law enforcement or towing and impoundment companies.

Awareness

Results of a questionnaire conducted by the Washington Traffic Safety Commission in Seattle showed that 56% of respondents correctly answered that the law allows motorcycles of unendorsed riders to be impounded. Interviewees suggested that riders in rural areas or riders who are not part of a riding group are less likely to be aware of the law.

Enforcement

There was no significant effect of the law on citations for operating a motorcycle without a proper endorsement.

Interviews with law enforcement officials and towing-company representatives suggested that motorcycles were being impounded under the law, but not in great numbers. When motorcycles are not impounded, it appears to be due to a combination of factors, including (a) the unlikelihood of detecting unendorsed riders, (b) the disinclination of law enforcement officers to impound motorcycles, and (c) the explicit instructions to law enforcement agencies to not impound vehicles.

Interviews suggested that impoundments were more common immediately after the law became effective and that occasional increases may have occurred around the time of local high-visibility motorcycle safety activities. The Washington State Patrol impounded an average of 20 motorcycles per month from July 2007 to December 2009, and this average dropped to 10 motorcycles per month in 2010.

Endorsements

After controlling for effects of the economy, there was no significant increase in new endorsements or in total endorsements after the law. Interviews with state officials, law enforcement officials, and riders resulted in anecdotal evidence suggesting riders who had previously ridden without an endorsement obtained one because of the law. If that is true, there were apparently not enough endorsements obtained to demonstrate a statistically significant increase.

Riders Taking Safety Training

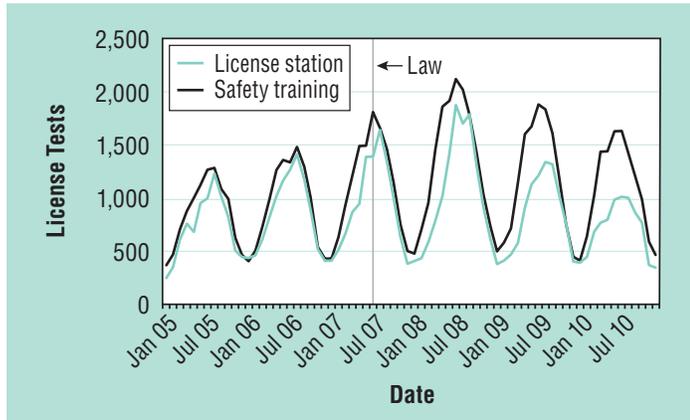
In Washington, a rider can obtain a motorcycle endorsement by receiving a waiver from successfully completing a safety training course, or by taking a test at a licensing station. The number of riders obtaining endorsements through safety training tests was compared to those receiving endorsements through tests at licensing stations before and after the law.

There were significant increases in the number of endorsements obtained from both safety training tests and from licensing station tests. However, when the two means of

testing were combined, there was not a significant increase in the total number of endorsement tests.

The ratio of applicants taking safety training tests to those taking licensing station tests increased significantly by 10.8% after the law (Figure 1). Nearly all of the interviewees for this project told stories of an increase in the number of riders taking training because of the law.

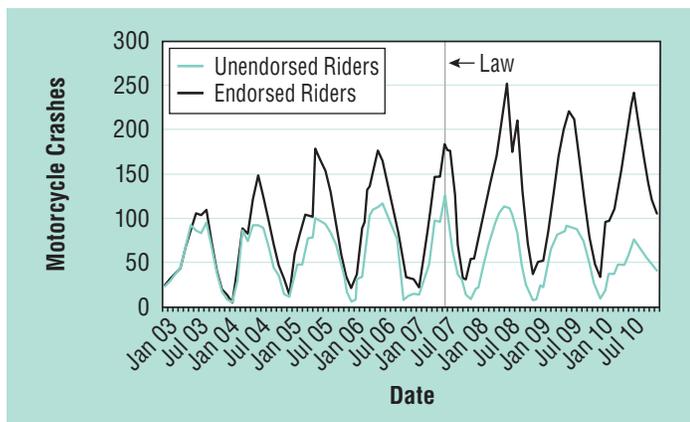
Figure 1. License tests by type



Crashes

After controlling for unemployment, there was not a significant decrease in motorcycle crashes after the law. There was a significant 21.9% reduction in the proportion of crashes involving unendorsed riders after the law went into effect (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Crashes by license status



Conclusions

Results from this study were somewhat inconclusive and difficult to interpret. The law appears to have not caused unexpected problems for law enforcement, but it also appears that not many motorcycles have been impounded. It is unclear why the number of riders receiving endorsements through safety training tests and through licensing station tests increased, but that the total number of endorsement tests taken and the number of new endorsements did not increase. It is similarly unclear why there was a shift towards a larger proportion of riders becoming endorsed through safety training. Previous wait times for safety training classes have reportedly been eliminated, which could explain this change.

It is also difficult to identify why there was a reduction in the proportion of crashes involving unendorsed riders after the law, but no reduction in total crashes. One possibility is that there was a shift in endorsement rates in the population at large, indicating that the law has been effective in causing unendorsed riders to become endorsed; but this interpretation would seem to run counter to the lack of significant increases in the endorsement rate for the same period. Another possible interpretation is that the law discouraged unendorsed riders from riding, thus limiting their exposure. However, if the shift was due to a reduction in crashes of unendorsed riders, we would likely have seen a significant reduction in overall crashes.

Washington's impoundment law was implemented soon before the national economic downturn, which may have obscured effects of the law. When controlling for the economic effects on crashes and endorsements, the economic factors account for most of the change. It is therefore very difficult to understand changes in crashes and endorsements that might have occurred due to the law.

How to Order

Download a copy of *An Examination of Washington State's Vehicle Impoundment Law for Motorcycle Endorsements* (39 pages plus appendices), prepared by Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, from <http://www.nhtsa.gov/staticfiles/nti/pdf/811696.pdf>. Jessica Cicchino, Ph.D., was the task order manager for this project.