

Title: UNIVERSAL HELMET LAW: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN LAW, ENFORCEMENT AND CULTURE ON LEVEL OF USE

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Abstract:

Although the universal bicycle helmet law went into effect in Israel in October 2007, there have been a few attempts to amend it so adults will only have to wear helmets while cycling in inter-urban roads, during competitions and while engaging in sport-related activities on bike trails.

The main arguments that have been raised against the universal helmets law are:

1. Legislation regarding the mandatory usage of helmets discourages a large portion of the population from cycling.
2. Despite the increasing use of bicycles in the past few years there has been a dramatic decrease in the rate of cyclists' injuries.
3. Most of the cyclists' injuries occur while they ride in inter-urban roads in rural areas.

While the discussion about the necessity of the helmet wearing law in the political sphere is still at its peak, it was deemed necessary to ascertain the actual public opinion on this issue. To this end, a national survey was conducted in September 2009 by the National Road Safety Authority (NRSA) to fully understand the attitudes and perceived safety standards by the Israeli cyclists. The survey was based on telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 702 (493 Jewish and 209 Arabs) bicycle riders and parents to children riders under 17. The survey focused on the current helmet usage patterns of bicycle riders in Israel: how many riders own helmets, the frequency of use and reasons riders do or do not use helmets. The survey also collected information about characteristics of riders and their riding patterns. The main findings are that bike helmet ownership among adult bike riders is 60%. Of those who owned a helmet, 80% of the Jewish respondents and 88% of the Arabs respondents said that safety was the reason for buying the helmet. On the other hand 34% of the Jewish respondents and 42% of the Arabs respondents said a helmet is not important and doesn't contribute to safety. The three main factors that were associated with helmet usage were age (riders older than 25 years wear helmets more frequently compared to 18-24 years old riders); level of education (educated riders tend to wear helmets more than less educated riders); and having children (older and more educated riders with children are more likely to wear helmets compared to riders with no children).

Attitudes towards the universal helmet law were quite positive: 81% of the adult bicycle riders were in favor of the helmet wearing law and were familiar with its requirements. Even among those who do not use a helmet regularly, 51% favored such a law. On the other hand, only 66% of the Jewish respondents and 61% of the Arabs respondents think it is important to wear a helmet on every ride regardless of the type of road and activity. Also 75% think that there is no enforcement of the law and 77% perceive the probability of receiving a ticket as very low. There was an interaction between age and culture: more Jewish children (68%) own a helmet than Jewish adults (60%), but fewer Arab children (49%) own a helmet than Arab adults (58%). The likelihood of children to wear a helmet was related to their parents' riding habits: more children (81%) whose parents ride use helmets than children whose parents do not ride (66%). Based on the above pattern of results, recommended strategies to be used to improve helmet wearing rates are being developed. These include giving or subsidizing helmets, using

public information campaigns to emphasize the contribution of helmet wearing to the safety of the rider, and targeted campaigns to the Arab population, and to parents of bicycling children.