

## Risk of the ride: Motorcycle accidents, fatalities on the rise

By [Patti Jones](#) / *Seattle Times staff reporter*

It looked like a party at the Buckaroo Tavern in Fremont. Outside sat 16 motorcycles, of all shapes and sizes. Inside: a crowd so large it spilled outdoors and onto the sidewalk. "This is the busiest I've ever seen this place," noted a woman with maroon hair.

But the men and women in leathers had come to share their sorrows. It was a wake for Damien Tolentino, 35, a round man with large tattoos and, by all accounts, a big heart.

Tolentino hailed from Hawaii. He'd moved to Seattle a few years back, eventually landing a bartending job at the Buckaroo, joining the punk-style Idol Threats band and falling in love with a girl named Maggie. He'd been married just nine months when his Honda GS750 collided with a Toyota Tercel in Wallingford.

A sign marking his death on the afternoon of July 27 still stands on the corner of North 40th Street and Meridian Avenue North, put there by parishioners of the nearby Gift of Grace Church.

To safety experts, Tolentino is yet another piece in a worrisome puzzle. While the Washington state death rate for car accidents is a quarter of what it was 20 years ago, the rate for motorcyclists remains high. For cars: 1.5 per 10,000 registered vehicles. For motorcycles: 4.

"If you compare motorcycles to cars using the number of miles traveled instead of the number of vehicles registered, the death rate would be horrifically higher," says Dick Doane, research analyst for the Washington Traffic Safety Commission.

According to police, Tolentino had been traveling east on North 40th when he was hit by a westbound car turning left on Meridian. Apparently, the 24-year-old driver, who was physically unharmed, hadn't seen him, police say.

Just two weeks later, an off-duty fire captain on funeral-escort duty in South Seattle was killed when a car pulled out of a driveway right in front of him. Again, the car driver had failed to spot the motorcyclist.

Many car drivers complain bitterly about motorcycle riders. They say riders exceed speed limits, and indeed speed was a factor in more than half the deaths of riders between ages 21 and 30 from 1993 to 2001 in Washington state. They say riders drive while drunk, and indeed alcohol was involved in 109 of the 365 accidents. They also say that riders weave in and out of traffic, pass on the right and don't signal.

So, to them, the findings of a NHTSA-funded study, the most comprehensive ever conducted on motorcycle safety, may come as a surprise. Looking at 4,500 accidents in Los Angeles, researchers found that when motorcycles and other vehicles collided, it is usually the driver in the car who violated the motorcyclist's right of way. While that study was done in 1981, periodic looks at state police reports in Washington suggest its findings hold true today, said Dave Wendell, program manager for Evergreen Motorcycle Safety Training in Seattle.

"Car drivers don't see us because they're not looking for us," Wendell said. "They're looking for something at least 6 feet wide with two headlights."

### Older riders and bigger bikes

Of course, motorcycle risks have been around since Marlon Brando vrrrooomed on screen in "The Wild One." But it seems they have been compounded in recent years by new risks. On a national level, motorcycle deaths have for the last four years been steadily rising. The latest figures show that 3,181 people died in motorcycle crashes in 2001, up nearly 10 percent from 2000, according to Rae Tyson of NHTSA in Washington, D.C. (In

Washington state, fatality numbers are too small to detect such a trend, Doane says. But preliminary figures for 2001 are 55, compared to 39 in 2000.)

"The thing that's perplexing to us is why, after years of steady progress, we're suddenly seeing an increase in fatalities," Tyson said. "That's a question all the motorcycling community is trying to answer."

In search of answers, the NHTSA recently analyzed figures on everything from riders' age to favored makes of motorcycles. Some findings:

\* Ridership has soared. Between 1991 and 2001, motorcycle sales more than doubled. (In Washington state there are now more than 120,000 registered motorcycles.) However, this can't be the whole reason for the rise in motorcycle fatalities, because the death rate has outpaced the surge in riders.

\* Riders are older. In 1980, the average age was 24. Now it's 38 - pushed up perhaps by baby boomers trying to recapture the Easy Rider spirit of their youth. On the face of it, this trend should counter the death rate. After all, older riders are more apt to wear helmets and take motorcycle-safety classes. But the fatality rate for riders older than 40 is growing faster than the rates for any other age group.

\* Larger-engine motorcycles are more common. "People used to buy motorcycles with 350cc (cubic centimeters) or less," Wendell said. "But this is America and everybody now wants a big motorcycle with up to 1500cc." Weighing as much as 700 pounds, these motorcycles are capable of going 150 miles an hour but can be tough for the inexperienced to turn or stop safely. They're not starter bikes, and yet many newcomers are buying them - particularly older riders, because they're the ones who can afford them. In Washington state, the majority of 30- to 50-year-olds killed on motorcycles died when riding 750cc or more.

Other changes that might affect the death rate: increased popularity of SUVs, which are larger and higher than most cars; a loosening up of helmet laws in some states (not Washington); and long lines for motorcycle-safety classes. In Washington state, for example, state-subsidized courses are booked up to December. Some other states have a wait as long as a year.

"A lot of people say, 'I didn't pay \$18,000 for a brand-new Harley to have it just sit in the garage,' " said Wendell. "They'll ride before taking their first class."

### **Paying attention behind the wheel**

So what would a class teach motorcyclists about being seen?

"White, orange and yellow are the most visible colors, but the average motorcycle rider wears black," Wendell said. "My recommendation is to wear a retroflective vest, which is not too garish, and to install a headlight modulator (which pulsates light). Since I did these two things, I've noticed a significant reduction in the number of cars turning left in front of me."

Steve Lucas, a former vice president of the Vintage Motorcycle Club who was at Tolentino's wake, believes education is key, too. But for car drivers, as well as motorcyclists.

"People who drive cars need to put down their cellphones and start paying more attention," he said, standing in a Buckaroo doorway as other grievors squeezed past. "In the last 10 years, I've lost four friends. Now Damien.

"Make that five."