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By HALLE STOCKTON

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Deaths Surge As More People Ride Motorcycles

The price of gas is what led Scott Stevens of Arcadia to begin riding his motorcycle instead of the family SUV to and from work at Sarasota Memorial Hospital.

Stevens, 47, had five children, and the extra money made a difference at home. He was killed the night of Oct. 16 returning from work on State Road 70 when a car swerved into his lane, and the driver fled without helping Stevens.

Stevens was among 22 motorcyclists killed in Manatee and Sarasota counties in 2008, the highest death toll for this area in at least a decade. Nearly half of those deaths have occurred since September, and four were in December alone.

Such grim numbers are not isolated. Deaths of motorcyclists are increasing statewide and nationally, as high gas prices and a dismal economy have forced more people to look to motorcycles as primary transportation rather than recreation.

In Florida, a surge in the number of motorcyclists, paired with a 2000 state law allowing most of them to ditch helmets, has led to an unprecedented spike in the number of riders being killed.

"Motorcycles are inherently more dangerous because you don't have all the protection that an automobile provides you," said Florida Highway Patrol Lt. Chris Miller. "You don't have airbags or seat belts. You don't have all that steel surrounding your body, so you're going to take a large part of that impact to your body."

Miller also said combining those risks with the "sheer number" of bikers now on the road explains why motorcycle accidents and fatalities are at a record high.

A quick look at the numbers illustrates his point.

In 2006, 1.1 million motorcycles were purchased in the United States, a 29 percent increase from 2001, according to the Motorcycle Industry Council. The record is 1.5 million motorcycles purchased in 1975 - when fuel prices were at a peak.

Since 2002, motorcycle registrations swelled more than 60 percent in both Manatee and Sarasota counties.

Nationwide, 5,037 motorcyclists died in 2007, the highest death count in more than 30 years and accounting for about 12 percent of all motor vehicle deaths that year, said Anne Fleming, a spokesperson for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

In Florida, there were 517 motorcycle fatalities in 2007, compared with 155 such deaths in 1999 - the last full year in which riders in Florida were required to wear helmets, according to Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicle records.

Economic realities are one reason there are more motorcyclists on the road, experts say. A decent used motorcycle can be picked up for \$2,000 and most bikes get 40 miles to the gallon or more.

Mike Ellerbe, a motorcycle safety instructor at Manatee Community College, asks each new student to explain at the start of class why he or she wants to ride a motorcycle.

Usually, there is a mix of older men harking back to an old hobby and the younger adults who want to ride because motorcycles are fun and cheap, he said.

"But more people have been saying the \$4 price of gas and the high mileage per gallon" is the reason for switching to a motorcycle, Ellerbe said.

Legislators seem to waver on how involved they should be in mandating safety precautions for motorcycle riders.

Congress removed federal sanctions against states without helmet use laws in 1995. Currently, 27 states have laws that typically pertain only to riders 18 and younger. Three states abolished their helmet laws altogether, and the remaining 20 states and the District of Columbia have mandatory helmet laws.

In 2000, Governor Jeb Bush signed a law repealing Florida's mandatory helmet law for anyone older than 21 with at least \$10,000 of medical insurance.

The number of motorcycle deaths has soared since then, something that has also occurred in other states where helmet laws were relaxed, said Fleming, of the Insurance Institute.

To counter the soaring fatalities in Florida, state legislators enacted a law in July requiring all new cyclists to pass a safety class before being granted the motorcycle license endorsement.

The course, which was previously only mandatory for riders younger than 21, involves five hours of classroom instruction

and 10 hours of riding practice on a certified training range.

During these state-required classes, students must wear helmets and they are strongly encouraged to pick up the habit outside of class.

"But we can't get legislation taking the state back to a mandatory helmet law," said Marianne Trussell, chief safety officer for the Florida Department of Transportation.

Other states have reinstated helmet laws. In Louisiana, state officials weakened the helmet law in 1999. But when motorcyclist deaths doubled, the law mandating that helmets be worn was reinstated.

In Florida, Sen. Larcenia Bullard, D-Miami, is considering proposing a bill that would reinstate mandatory helmet use, said her legislative assistant Marvin Wilson. Action may be taken once the Senate's regular session commences, Wilson said.

Any such bill is likely to face opposition from motorcycle riders, who consider whether to use a helmet a "personal rights issue," Trussell said.

"They say, 'It's my decision to wear a helmet and decide whether I'm going to die riding my motorcycle or not.'"