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TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT DECLINING AS COLORADO MOTORCYCLE FATALITIES REACHES PEAK

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INTRODUCTION

In 2024, Colorado recorded 165 motorcyclist deaths, the most in a single year in the state's history and 11% above the next highest year of 149 deaths in 2022. The tragic increase in fatalities among motorcyclists coincides with a troubling trend in Colorado's traffic enforcement, and citizens' adherence to driving regulations.

This concerning pattern emerges against a backdrop of declining vehicle registrations, particularly for motorcycles, suggesting that more unregistered vehicles may be operating on Colorado roads. Simultaneously, traffic enforcement has plummeted by more than half since 2018, creating conditions where risky driving behaviors potentially go unchecked. The divergence is striking: fewer registered motorcycles on the road, yet substantially more motorcycle-related fatalities.

The implications extend beyond motorcyclists and affect road safety for all Coloradans. With motorcyclist deaths now representing nearly a quarter of all traffic fatalities—despite motorcycles constituting a small fraction of vehicles on the road—understanding this disproportionate impact becomes critical for policymakers and transportation officials.

This brief examines the period of 2018-2024 in Colorado and how declines in traffic enforcement and vehicle registration have coincided with a dramatic increase in motorcycle deaths. By analyzing county-level data, enforcement statistics, and fatality trends, this report aims to identify potential causal factors and provide actionable insights for reversing this alarming trend.

KEY FINDINGS

- Between 2018 and 2024, Colorado's non-permit driving age (18+) population grew an estimated 6.4%, yet during that time:
 - The number of total regular licenses in force in Colorado declined by 0.8% from 3,994,000 to 3,963,000.
 - Total traffic penalties assessed fell by over 54% from 159,000 in 2018 to just 72,800 in 2024. Revenue generated from these penalties fell by \$3.2 million or 23% during this time, indicating that smaller violations were likely the bulk of the decline.
 - The number of registered passenger vehicles in the state increased by just 1.8% and the number of motorcycles registered declined by 9%.
- While the number of registered motorcycles on Colorado's roads fell by 9%, the number of motorcyclist deaths in Colorado increased 60% from 2018-2024. Motorcyclist deaths now account for 24% of all traffic deaths in the state, up from 16% in 2018.
 - Passenger vehicles deaths have decreased 7% during this time.
- In 2024, 165 motorcyclists died on Colorado's roads, the highest number in the state's history.
- If motorcycle registrations kept pace with population growth, Colorado would've generated \$8 million of additional state registration revenue between 2019-2024, not including county registration fees.
- Among Colorado's 11 largest counties, Arapahoe had the largest rate decline in the total number of registered passenger vehicles while Denver had the largest decrease in registered motorcycles.

Change in the Number of Registered Passenger Vehicles and Motorcycles 2018-2024		
County	Passenger	Motorcycle
Adams	3.83%	-12.12%
Arapahoe	-9.87%	-20.60%
Boulder	-2.50%	-19.36%
Denver	-3.54%	-25.76%
Douglas	25.63%	-0.60%
El Paso	5.10%	-1.43%
Jefferson	-5.87%	-17.81%
Larimer	2.64%	-9.41%
Mesa	7.93%	8.02%
Pueblo	1.47%	-6.09%
Weld	13.76%	1.72%
Statewide	1.81%	-8.90%

REDUCTION IN TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT

The significant decline in traffic enforcement across Colorado represents a concerning trend that may correlate with the rise in motorcyclist fatalities. Between 2018 and 2024, total traffic penalties assessed throughout the state plummeted by over 54%, from 159,000 to just 72,800. This dramatic reduction occurred despite the state's driving age population increasing by 6.4% during this time and reflects a fundamental shift in law enforcement priorities rather than improved driving behaviors.

In Denver specifically, recent policy changes have deliberately de-emphasized traffic stops as part of broader policing reforms. The city has redirected resources toward addressing violent crime and property offenses, leaving fewer officers available for traffic enforcement duties.ⁱ Similar reprioritization has occurred across multiple jurisdictions throughout Colorado, where state and local law enforcement agencies have increasingly focused on more serious crimes amid staffing shortages and changing public safety paradigms.

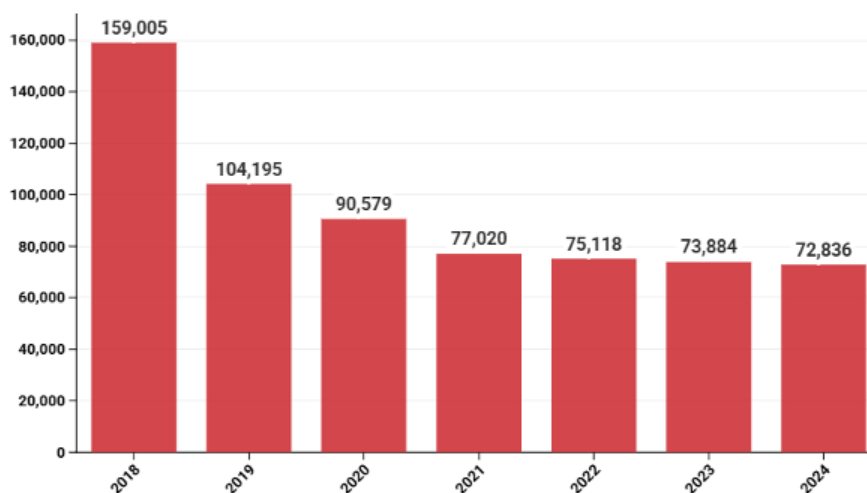
The consequences of this enforcement vacuum may be significant. With traffic violations less likely to result in penalties, the deterrent effect that traditionally discouraged reckless driving has weakened substantially. This is particularly problematic for motorcycle safety, as motorcyclists are more vulnerable to injury or death when involved in accidents.

As the number of penalties assessed dropped, so did associated revenue. In 2018 the state collected \$13.8 million from 159,000 violations. In 2024, Colorado collected just \$10.6 million from 72,800 violations.

The 23% decrease in revenue generated from traffic penalties—despite the much larger 54% drop in total penalties issued—suggests that enforcement has declined most dramatically for minor infractions that often serve as early intervention points for preventing more dangerous driving behaviors. Without these preventative measures, risky driving practices may escalate unchecked until they result in serious accidents or fatalities.

Traffic Penalties Assessed in Colorado

Traffic penalties assessed in the state fell by 54% from 2018 to 2024.



Source: Colorado Department of Revenue Annual Report

*Penalty Assessments can be defined as traffic offenses and infractions listed in C.R.S. 42-4-1701

DECLINE IN MOTORCYCLE REGISTRATION

The substantial decrease in registered motorcycles across Colorado presents a concerning contradiction when viewed alongside rising fatality rates. Between 2018 and 2024, motorcycle registrations declined by 8.9% statewide, from 194,847 to 177,511, despite the driving-age population growing by 6.4% during the same period.

This divergence suggests an increase in unregistered motorcycles operating on Colorado roads. If motorcycle registrations statewide had kept pace with the 6.4% increase in Colorado's driving age population, there would've been an estimated 30,000 more registered motorcycles in the state in 2024.

Motorcycle Registration in Colorado			
Year	Actual Number of Motorcycles Registered Statewide	Number of Registered Motorcycles Statewide if Registrations Kept Pace with Population Increase	Difference
2018	194,847	194,847	
2019	191,403	197,594	(6,191)
2020	177,115	199,985	(22,870)
2021	171,585	201,605	(30,020)
2022	181,745	203,218	(21,473)
2023	183,193	205,149	(21,956)
2024	177,511	207,385	(29,874)

This registration gap represents both a public safety concern and a significant revenue loss for Colorado. If motorcycle registrations had kept pace with population growth, the state would've garnered an estimated \$8 million in additional state registration fees from 2019-2024, not including county level revenue. Additionally, crashes caused by unregistered and uninsured vehicles shift the financial burden onto compliant citizens through higher insurance costs.

BOTTOM LINE

The alarming 60% increase in motorcyclist fatalities from 2018 to 2024, occurring simultaneously with a 9% decrease in registered motorcycles, signals a critical public safety challenge for Colorado. This paradoxical trend—fewer registered motorcycles yet significantly more deaths—strongly suggests that unregistered vehicles and diminished traffic enforcement are contributing to a more dangerous road environment. The 54% reduction in traffic penalties during this period has seemingly created a permissive atmosphere where risky driving behaviors go unchecked.

Colorado faces a clear choice: restore meaningful traffic enforcement or continue to witness preventable tragedies on its roadways. The financial implications are equally concerning—the state has forfeited approximately \$8 million in motorcycle registration revenue alone since 2019, in a year when the state predicts a \$1.2 billion budget shortfall.ⁱⁱ

Moving forward, policymakers must recognize that effective traffic enforcement is not merely punitive but serves as a crucial protective measure for all road users, particularly vulnerable motorcyclists. Reversing these troubling trends will likely require a renewed commitment to registration compliance and targeted enforcement of dangerous driving behaviors.

REFERENCES

- i. DPD shifts away from low-level traffic stops, prioritizing higher level crimes
- ii. CSI Report - CO Budget Forecast_d1-2.pdf