State Motorcycle Safety Association

INFORMATIONAL REPORT:
LANE FILTERING AND SPLITTING

STATE MOTORCYCLE SAFETY ASSOCIATION (SMSA)

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Developers: Members of the SMSA Policy and Research Committee (2025)

SMSA Lane Filtering and Splitting

Introduction

The mission of the State Motorcycle Safety Association (SMSA) is to assist motorcycle safety programs, through collaboration and partnerships, to implement comprehensive, data-driven motorcycle safety programs and countermeasures to achieve a significant reduction in motorcycle operator traffic crashes, fatalities and injuries.

The SMSA Policy and Research Committee uses the mission of the SMSA as a foundation from which to build informational reports, position statements, and the development and updating of SMSA resources.

What follows is an informational report on the current status of lane filtering and splitting in the United States, as well as the most current research on the topics of lane filtering and splitting. A broad range of stakeholders on the SMSA Policy and Research Committee worked to provide an evidence-based and unbiased report that clearly and succinctly outlines the information necessary to inform individuals who may be responsible for public policy decisions and position statements.

Definitions

In general, lane filtering and lane splitting refer to the practice of passing slower moving or stopped traffic by riding a motorcycle in the gap between two parallel lanes of traffic heading in the same direction, within the context of traffic laws. There are differentiating terms and definitions for these practices across states.

Lane Filtering: is the act of progressing toward the front of the stopped traffic by riding a motorcycle in the gap between two parallel lanes of stopped traffic heading in the same direction.

Lane Splitting: refers to the practice of passing moving traffic by riding a motorcycle in the gap between two parallel lanes of traffic heading in the same direction.

Lane Sharing: is where two or more motorcyclists ride abreast (ride side-by-side) in standing or moving traffic. Lane sharing is sometimes used as a general term for both filtering and splitting.

It is important to distinguish between the definitions of these practices and understand that state definitions and laws vary widely. These practices are sometimes clearly legal or clearly illegal. In some cases, there are no laws addressing the specific practice, meaning the practice is not explicitly legal or explicitly illegal.[1]

For the purposes of this document, the main focus will be on lane filtering and lane splitting as defined above.

Background

As of September 2025, Arizona, California, Colorado, Minnesota, Montana, and Utah allow variations of lane filtering and splitting under specified conditions. It is illegal in most other states; however, where it is not explicitly illegal, an offense is left to the discretion of law enforcement.

The legality of lane filtering and splitting continues to be controversial and an ongoing topic within the motorcycling, traffic safety, and legal communities. A lack of data and research on the advantages and disadvantages of these practices has left both sides of the discussion without verifiable support. Consequently, discussions have yielded only perceived benefits and potential risks related to the practices of lane filtering and lane splitting.

There is a scarcity of research on the risks of crashes associated with lane-filtering and lane-splitting.

One US based study, published in 2011, concludes that because lane-splitting contributes little to the population of motorcycle crashes, eliminating a ban on lane splitting is unlikely to lead to an increase in motorcycle crashes. The author also notes that if the study data is valid, "...a caution worth keeping in mind because of the small number of cases available for study – then laws that effectively ban motorcycle lane splitting may have the unintended effect of increasing motorcycle crashes."[1]

It is important to note the Safe Transportation Research and Education Center, University of California, Berkeley study titled "*Safety Implications of Lane-Splitting among California Motorcyclists Involved in Collisions,*" often referred to simply as the Berkeley lane-splitting study, is frequently incorrectly referenced as evidence that lane-splitting is safe. As the authors state, the study is a descriptive study that enabled them, "...only to examine the collision, personal, and injury characteristics of the riders." in the sample. Since no exposure data exists, the data obtained in this study, "...cannot be used to compare the collision risks for lane-splitting or non-lane-splitting riders."[2] The study is useful only for descriptive purposes.

[1] James Ouellet (2011). Lane Splitting on California Freeways. Retrieved from https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/562838-lane-splitting-on-calif-fwys-2011-07-24/

[2] Safe Transportation Research & Education Center University of California Berkeley (2015). Motorcycle Lane-splitting and Safety in California. Retrieved from https://www.ots.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/67/2019/06/Motorcycle-Lane-Splitting-and-Safety-2015.pdf.

Worldwide research on filtering/splitting indicates the practice reduces travel time for motorcyclists; however, worldwide research also indicates that filtering/splitting may significantly increase the risk of crash involvement.

Lane Filtering and Splitting Subject Matter Discussion

Section Topics

- Perceived Benefits and Potential Risks
- Differing Definitions and Laws Across States
- Education and Outreach Efforts
- Lack of Data and Research

Perceived Benefits and Potential Risks

With the increase in states adopting legislation that legalizes lane filtering and/or lane splitting for motorcyclists, it is important to understand the reasons why and the safety implications. The most prominent perceived benefits suggested by those who advocate for legalization of these practices include enhancing rider safety, reducing congestion, and improving traffic flow.

Advocates justify these perceived benefits based on the premise that motorcycles are smaller vehicles which allow motorcyclists to move more efficiently through traffic easing congestion and making traffic flow smoother especially during peak hours and in stop-and-go situations. Allowing motorcyclists to move through the congestion and avoid stop-and-go situations, it is felt, could enhance motorcyclist safety by reducing the risk of rear-end crashes.

Proponents of lane filtering and splitting also recognize these practices as a possible solution to the unique challenges associated with operating a motorcycle in slow traffic and stop-and-go situations including risk of fatigue and experiencing adverse weather conditions. A manual motorcycle requires an operator to coordinate operation of the clutch, throttle, and brake. The lack of protection from an enclosed cabin leaves motorcyclists exposed to elements, which can lead to exposure-related health risks. For motorcyclists operating a two-wheeled vehicle, the operator is frequently moving their feet from the footrests to the ground and/or walking the motorcycle at the speed of traffic.

For opponents of the legalization of these practices, the potential risks associated are grounds for concern. Factors contributing to the risks associated with lane filtering and splitting include limited visibility, reduced space cushion, limited escape paths, increase risk of rear-ending other vehicles, increased likelihood of blind spot placement, and other motorists concerns.[1]

A common rider safety practice is to maintain a safety margin. Riders aim to have a space cushion that provides time and space to brake or swerve to avoid a crash. Also, "You want to have an escape path that is open and allows you to avoid a collision. An escape path can be in front of you, to the right or to the left. Escape paths can be within your lane, in the next lane over, on a shoulder or median or even off the road if conditions permit. It is best to have more than one escape path so you don't get trapped." (Motorcycle Safety Foundation Basic RiderCourse, Rider Handbook, Edition 1, Fifth printing January, 2020, page 25).[1]

Filtering and splitting inherently involve riding very close to other vehicles, leaving little room for error. Motorcycle riders may need to make quick maneuvers to avoid obstacles, increasing the chance of collisions. In addition, drivers in lanes adjacent to filtering/splitting riders may not see a filtering/splitting motorcyclist. The rider and machine may be in a driver's blind spot.[1]

Additional concerns from those opposed to filtering and splitting take into consideration other motor-vehicle operators, which include:

- Motorists who are unfamiliar with these practices may be caught off-guard as a motorcyclist passes and move unpredictably, possibly increasing risk to all.
- Motorists may not be aware that these practices are legal or may not be in favor of them and may operate in a manner that makes filtering and splitting unsafe or unachievable.
- As a motorist is forced to sit in traffic, watching a motorcyclist freely pass may incite negative responses from the motorist.

Differing Definitions and Laws Across States

Differing definitions, especially when used inconsistently, can lead to confusion, miscommunication, and even conflict. This is also true for differing laws and regulations from state to state. Inconsistencies in definitions and state laws hinder effective conversation surrounding lane filtering and splitting, prevent reliable data collection and research, and create challenges for motorcycle operators trying to understand their legal obligations as they travel across states.

Education and Outreach Efforts

Education and outreach efforts have been important in raising awareness and informing and educating the public on many issues, including traffic safety. These efforts are especially vital for topics that are unfamiliar, obscure, contentious, etc. Lane filtering and splitting are among those topics.

Lane filtering and splitting are long-standing practices; however, they are still a little-known topic for both motorcyclists and other motor vehicle operators as it is illegal in most states. Additionally, inconsistencies in definitions and laws across states, along with limited data make these practices ambiguous.

The education and outreach efforts within States that have made lane filtering and splitting legal are not fully known. The success in that education has yet to be determined. To what extent these efforts exist, methods utilized, and the target audiences (motorcyclists and motorists) would be helpful in gathering information for evaluating what is working to educate the public and what is well perceived.

Limited Research and Data

Research and data related to the safety implications of lane filtering and splitting is limited. As the number of states legalizing these practices increases, it is important to collect data and conduct research to understand the impact it has on the perceived benefits and traffic safety, in general. It is also important to understand the differences between these practices and state regulations to conduct relevant research.

Summary

States considering implementing laws related to lane filtering and splitting should use the information in this document and reference materials as well as engage with a wide range of stakeholders to inform policy making. Additionally, states should consider their own unique traffic, roadway, environmental, and other relevant factors in their policy making efforts.

Currently, the practices of lane filtering and splitting are not adequately studied to draw research-based conclusions. There are a number of advocacy groups on both sides of the discussion, and there are competing ideas and agendas that cannot reasonably be tied to evidence in the sense of broad policy making statements.

As the topics of lane filtering and splitting continue to grow and the vehicle and traffic environment continue to change, the need for quality research will become even more critical for informing policy.