

Preventing preventable deaths of young people: The importance of ATV/UTV safety

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MACOUPIN COUNTY - Several people, including children and young teenagers, have been seriously, and in some cases - fatally, injured in accidents involving ATVs and UTVs over the last year.

These such accidents are more common in rural areas, such as Jersey and Macoupin Counties. Riverbender.com reached out to Macoupin County Sheriff Shawn Kahl in regards to a recent accident in which two young women were airlifted for treatment after a rollover of a UTV accident. One - [13-year-old Madyson Loftis of Benld](#) - died as a

result of the injuries sustained in that accident. Earlier on that same exact day, Kahl said deputies responded to a call in Bunker Hill for a 13-year-old male who had "cracked his head" following a dirt bike accident.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) keeps an on-going record of deaths caused by ATV-related incidents. Between 1982-2015 (when most recent records were updated), 14,129 deaths were caused from those sorts of accidents. Three hundred forty of those deaths occurred in 2015, 547 in 2014 and 581 in 2013. While those numbers seem to be on the decrease, Kahl said his office has responded to as many as three fatal accidents resulting from ATV and UTV usage, and several more injuries.

"The sheriff's office has handled at least two deaths," Kahl said Friday afternoon. "There was the recent one with the UTV side-by-side, and there was also the teenager on the four-wheeler in May. A deputy also collided with a man on an ATV on a public roadway. [There were also those two girls from Macoupin County who were hit by that truck and trailer in Jersey County.](#) One of them died. I hear the other is doing much better now."

At least two of those preventable deaths were caused by such off-road-vehicles crossing into public roads. This is illegal, Kahl said, unless that vehicle is simply passing across the road to get to the other side. Unfortunately, while Kahl agrees the problem of such vehicles on the public highway system is rampant in Macoupin County, he said it was nearly an impossible law to enforce.

"You can't really enforce it," he said. "If our deputies happen by on patrol and see a four-wheeler being used inappropriately, a lot of times, we cannot pursue. They just take off running, and it's way too dangerous to chase them. All they have to do is leave the roadway and go to a field, and what are they going to do then? There are ditches they can cross we cannot. It's definitely a problem in Macoupin County."

Because of these recent slew of deaths and injuries, [including two requiring airlifts from a mud festival in Otterville](#), Kahl said he has been working with Southwestern School District Superintendent Brad Skertich to bring more informative programs to Southwestern High School to emphasize the importance of safety when utilizing such off-road utility vehicles.

"We placed two deputies for training awareness at the high school, and we brought teachers and deputies in to teach people how to be safe on these things," Kahl said.

Unfortunately, the sort of resources - such as manpower and finances - required for the proper implementation of such a program are lacking in the sheriff's office at this time. Kahl said he and Skertich were working together in an effort to spread awareness despite that lack.

"We try to get together a little more, and maybe get senators to look at the possibilities of other things," Kahl said. "Maybe we could get some laws passed. I think there is a state out west that requires mandatory training before riding at certain ages. We started talking about that, and discussed it, but it's such a big, broad problem - as far as resources and money - to do that training at all is going to be a burden to us. And, not everyone is going to abide by it if it does happen."

In the meantime, Kahl wants people to be aware of proper safety procedure when operating off-road vehicles - such as protective gear.

"The main thing is putting a helmet on," Kahl said. "If you're going out riding anything - if it's a small dirt bike, an ATV or a UTV, which is about the size of a small car - wear a helmet. A lot of these deaths are caused by blunt force trauma to the head, which could be fixed by wearing a helmet. Without wearing a helmet, there's no way to defend against that."

Besides helmets, Kahl said protective gear is available for the rest of the body too, including heavy-duty full suits with skid protection. Kahl said such equipment is called "riding gear," and even includes the option of thick riding gloves. Clothes come with built-in knee pads, shin guards and eye protection.

Safety also includes maintaining and inspecting the vehicles. Many accidents are caused by brake failure, Kahl said, so checking brakes and tires is essential.