

Speed Limits

Frequently Asked Questions

How should speed limits be set?

The Federal Highway Administration, along with the Institute of Transportation Engineers, maintain that speed limits should only be established on the basis of an engineering study. It is recommended that the speed limit be set at the nearest 5 mph increment to the 85th percentile of what people are driving. Studies show that the 85th percentile is the safest possible level to set a speed limit and setting it lower does not encourage compliance with the posted speed limit.

What are “realistic” speed laws?

Realistic speed limits invite public compliance by confirming the driving behavior of the majority, give clear reminder of reasonable and prudent speeds to nonconforming violators, offer an effective enforcement tool for law enforcement, and tend to minimize public antagonism toward law enforcement for perceived unreasonable regulations.

Isn't slower always safer?

Federal and state studies show that drivers most likely to get into crashes are those traveling significantly below the average speed. Research shows, those driving 10 mph slower than the prevailing speed are more likely to be involved in a crash.

Wouldn't everyone drive faster if the speed limit was raised?

The majority of drivers will not go faster than what they feel is comfortable and safe regardless of the speed limit. A national study conducted by the Federal Highway Administration concluded that raising or lowering the speed limit had little effect on travel speeds.

Don't higher speed limits cause more crashes and traffic fatalities?

If a speed limit is raised to actually reflect real travel speeds, the new higher limit will make the roads safer. When the majority of traffic is traveling at the same speed, traffic flow improves and there are fewer crashes. Speed alone is rarely the cause of crashes. Differences in speed are the main problem. Reasonable speed limits help traffic to flow at a safer, more uniform pace.

Aren't most traffic crashes caused by speeding?

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration claims that 30 percent of all fatal crashes are “speed related.” This means that in less than a third of the cases, one of the drivers involved in the crash was “assumed” to be exceeding the posted limit. It does not mean that speeding caused the crash.

If drivers don't follow the speed limit, why does it matter that they are underposted?

Inappropriately established speed limits cause drivers to take other traffic control devices less seriously. Unrealistic speed limits create two groups of drivers; those that try to obey the limit and those that drive at a speed they feel is safe and reasonable. This causes dangerous differences in speed, which can lead to increased crashes due to tailgating, improper passing, weaving, reckless driving, and even road rage.

Don't lower speed limits save gas?

Research has shown that the 55 mph National Maximum Speed Limit, which was enacted specifically to save gas, had practically no impact on fuel consumption. Speed limits based on actual travel speeds promote better traffic flow, which reduces the amount of braking and accelerating, having a positive effect on fuel consumption.

Additional information can be found at: https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/speedmgt/ref_mats/fhwasa12004/fhwasa12004.pdf