

Higher Speed Limits — Less Fatal Crashes

by Greg Mauz, Florida Activist



When NMA-inspired legislation led to the repeal of the 55/65 mph National Maximum Speed Limits, the "safety" zealots, including the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) screamed bloody carnage would result from states raising their speed limits. The prediction that over "6,400 lives would be lost" proved to be ludicrous. NHTSA and IIHS have scrambled each year to prove their claims as the mileage fatality rate declines to record levels.

In January 1999, IIHS produced their latest "study" claiming over "500 lives" or "15% increases in fatalities" in 24 states that raised limited-access divided highway (LADH) speed limits. "Deaths didn't increase at all on interstates and freeways where speed limits weren't raised." NHTSA's "study" made similar claims. I found eight states with higher interstate fatalities that had no speed limit changes. Conversely, there were five higher limit states with fewer fatalities.

The IIHS's seven "no increase" states, upon careful examination, revealed that four of them actually logged increases in fatal crashes on LADHs for 1996. New Jersey incurred 96 fatal crashes in 1995 versus 129 the next year. That

equates to a 35% increase in a state posted at 55 mph. "Fifty-five saves lives?" Maine, another *control* state, shows 11 fatal crashes in 1995, 18 in 1996 and 23 in 1997. No increases?

The graph below will set the record straight with no cherry picking involved. Despite over 36 states with higher speed limits, 1997 contains 110 less fatal crashes on all LADHs as compared to 1995, the year before the 55/65 repeal. This equates to about **140 less fatalities**. Furthermore, the overall and LADH fatality rate **dropped at least 6% each**.

It's strange, the mileage fatality rate, frozen for four years at 1.7, finally improves after over half of the states raised their speed limits in 1996. With even more speed limit increases in 1997, the rates continue to improve. Considering the fact that drivers logged 39 billion additional vehicle miles traveled on LADHs, while sustaining 110 less fatal crashes infers just the opposite of what IIHS claims. Adding fatal crash rate improvements to less fatal crashes results in a net minimum of 400 less fatalities after speed limit increases, **not** 500 more.

It's time for this IIHS/NHTSA inspired myth—that higher speed limits cause more crashes and fatalities to be given a final burial.

Back in July 1986, a U. S. Department of Transportation traffic engineer was interviewed in *Newsweek*. He admitted, "It's impossible to isolate any direct correlation between speed and safety." *Establishing Speed Limits—A Case of Majority Rule* (Arizona D.O.T. October 1997) says, "No published research findings have established any direct relationship between posted speed limits and accident frequency."

Despite all the rhetoric, this argument isn't about safety. It's about insurance companies' bottom lines and over-inflated government budgets. Speeding fines net a conservative estimate of \$2 billion to governments and \$6 billion annually to insurance companies. Lower, improperly set speed limits—and 90% of them still are—result in millions of tickets being unjustly issued to motorists travelling at reasonable and safe speeds. Higher limits result in fewer tickets, hence less money.

A preponderance of evidence proves that higher speed limits do **not** cause more crashes and fatalities. A more valid argument would be that higher speed limits actually improve traffic safety. The graph's statistics certainly support this. Higher speed limits are safer. **Case closed!** 🐾

U. S. FATAL CRASHES

Year	Interstates	Freeway/Expressway	Total	Percent	Total Fatal Crashes	
					All Roads	Fatality Rate
1995	4,132	1,637	5,769	15.5%	37,221	1.7
1996	4,482	1,345	5,827	15.6%	37,351	1.68
1997	4,516	1,143	5,659	15.2%	37,280	1.6
(changes '95-'97)	+384	-494	-110	-2%	+59	-6%

Source: NHTSA, Fatal Crashes by State and Roadway Function Class