

Speeding Crash Statistics

Camera proponents, when promoting photo radar, preach that “speeding” or “disobeying posted speed limits” is the most prevalent cause of crashes and fatalities. Of course, “It’s getting worse all the time.” The IIHS claims there occurred an increase in speeding related fatal crashes since the repeal of 55. Everyone has heard the slogan “speed kills” or “55 Saves Lives.” Are these slogans true or just biased propaganda used to condone intensive and profitable speed enforcement?

NHTSA, the keeper of national traffic safety statistics, claims “Speeding - exceeding the posted speed limit or driving too fast for conditions - is one of the most prevalent factors contributing to traffic crashes. In 1998, speeding was a contributing factor in 30 percent of all fatal crashes and 12,477 lives were lost in speeding-related crashes.” Economic cost to society: \$27.7 billion “annually”. Like the IIHS “22% running traffic controls” figure, “speeding-related” is a vague, all-inclusive, misleading term requiring extensive analysis of the fine print to get to the truth. Since NHTSA and the IIHS promote and/or profit from speed enforcement, photo radar and red-light cameras, they not only condone, but actively encourage the media presentation of these totally misleading crash percentages. Like Paul Harvey would say, “and now, the rest of the story...”

Traffic crash statistics, especially for speeding, can already mislead the average citizen. U.S. and most state statistics allow up to 3 factors per crash as “contributing circumstances.” For example: Joe Citizen, with a .18 blood alcohol content (BAC), runs a red-light at 10 MPH over the speed limit, colliding with another vehicle and killing the driver. Without question, the primary cause of the wreck is drunk driving. RLR becomes the second factor. Violating the speed limit played an inconsequential role in the crash, but becomes logged into the statistics anyway. Further analysis of “speeding” stats reveal that, oftentimes, the majority are actually weather-caused accidents. Many of these crashes occur well below the posted speed limit. However, they qualify as “speeding” under “speed too fast for conditions.” The question is: what percentage of all and fatal crashes can honestly cite true speeding as the primary cause?

NHTSA’s first qualifier states, “In 1998, 43% of the intoxicated drivers (BAC = .10 or higher) involved in fatal crashes were speeding.” This admission eliminates 5,343 “speeding-related” deaths right out of the picture. (Traffic Safety Facts, 1998, pages 160-163). Or, on page 100, the more accurate -- but not totally -- speeding factors number 11,183 and 19.8%, a far cry from 30%. Subtracting out the 4,275 drunks who were speeding leaves 6,908 factors out of 56,543 total or 12.22%.

More fine print. Speeding was a factor in 32% of fatal wet road crashes, 55% of snow covered roads and 60% of those that occurred on icy roads. Ice can be unsafe at any speed. These “speed too fast for conditions” crashes total 1,792.

More creative bookkeeping abounds. Patrick Bedard, of Car and Driver, analyzed

NHTSA's "speeding-related" statistical bookkeeping in 1996. His seven page exposé appeared in the September issue. At that time, they claimed 33% of fatalities were "speed-related." Bedard's search through the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) uncovered all manner of spin-doctoring to greatly exaggerate "speeding's" role in causing crashes. FARS analysts add their own opinions to the state police accident reports. Their interpretation of "speed-related" is so loose and biased that almost any accident qualifies. A NHTSA document states, "This (factor) is also used where conditions denote, such as weather, sharp curves, bridges, tunnels, school zones, traffic or persons in the road."

Bedard found that 89% of the "speed-related" crashes contained other factors, as well. His research revealed that only 3.3% of all crashes were related to speed alone. Furthermore, only 1% of all fatal crash drivers received speeding tickets from police at the accident scene.

Although I cannot pinpoint an exact figure, my research concurs with Bedard's. Judging from state statistics and subtracting out NHTSA's DWI, weather caused, police chase fatalities, suicides, driver's speeding but not at fault, and illegitimate factors results in a conservative estimate of 1,800 fatal crashes caused primarily by speeding. This equates to less than 5% of the fatal crash pie. Looking at the more important big picture, speeding causes maybe 1% of all accidents. Considering that 90% of speed limits are posted too low (FHWA Speed Limit Survey, 1992) further diminishes these already tiny percentages.

The following graphs will further demonstrate NHTSA's flawed bookkeeping. State statistics, despite their biases and stacking, reveal numbers closer to Bedard's and my research than to NHTSA's. Florida's data, particularly for all accidents, remains very objective and is a model for others to follow. Fatal crashes are more subject to stacking (second and third factors) and biases. Still, most states generally log-in at about 10% for speeding factors, which remains nowhere near NHTSA's 30% claims.

VARIOUS STATE SPEEDING FACTORS 1997
STATE DEPARTMENTS OF PUBLIC SAFETY

| State | Speeding Factors All Crashes | Total All Factors | Speeding as % of All Factors | Speeding Factors Fatal Crashes | Total Fatal Factors | Speeding as % of Fatal Factors |
|-----------|------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| AL | 3,105 | 139,345 | 2.23 | 141 | 1,190 | 11.85 |
| AZ (A) | 925 | 215,490 | 0.43 | 37 | 1,271 | 2.91 |
| AZ (B) | 37,730 | 215,490 | 17.51 | 168 | 1,271 | 13.22 |
| CA (1996) | N/A | N/A | N/A | 321 | 3,989 | 8.05 |
| FL | 8,066 | 413,836 | 1.95 | 454 | 5,244 | 8.66 |
| MN | 14,227 | 191,962 | 7.41 | 119 | 1,203 | 9.90 |
| MT (A) | 148 | 34,888 | 0.42 | 7 | 292 | 2.40 |
| MT (B) | 3,873 | 34,888 | 11.10 | 43 | 292 | 14.75 |
| NJ | N/A | N/A | N/A | 66 | 757 | 8.73 |
| OH | 20,204 | 670,287 | 3.01 | 245 | 2,048 | 11.97 |

Notes: When separating "exceeded lawful speed" (A), from "speed too fast for conditions" (B), it becomes apparent that the latter is much more prevalent. See Arizona and Montana. One third of all Montana crashes occur due to inclement weather - rain, snow, ice or fog. Minnesota logged 160 fatal crashes during bad weather, while Ohio incurred 230. How many of these found their way into the fatal speeding factor column could not be determined. The point is: True speeding, as most people perceive it, causes very few accidents.

FLORIDA SPEEDING FACTORS 1994-1999
DEPARTMENT OF HIGHWAY SAFETY AND MOTOR VEHICLES

| Year | ALL CRASHES | | | FATAL CRASHES | | |
|------|------------------|---------------|------|------------------|---------------|------|
| | Speeding Factors | Total Factors | % | Speeding Factors | Total Factors | % |
| 1994 | 7,558 | 353,677 | 2.14 | 482 | 5,136 | 9.40 |
| 1995 | 8,442 | 394,311 | 2.14 | 554 | 5,570 | 9.95 |
| 1996 | 8,357 | 413,890 | 2.02 | 438 | 5,322 | 8.24 |
| 1997 | 8,066 | 413,836 | 1.95 | 454 | 5,244 | 8.66 |
| 1998 | 7,393 | 417,676 | 1.77 | 478 | 5,492 | 8.70 |
| 1999 | 7,140 | 399,429 | 1.79 | 472 | 5,627 | 8.40 |

Note: Around 350 annual fatal crashes occur due to inclement weather.

As noted, speeding accounted for less than 2% of all accident factors and 8.4% for fatal factors. Overall, 1999 recorded the best year, despite 1.3 million more drivers traveling over 17 billion additional miles since 1994. These numbers, from the fourth largest state, represent U.S. statistics, if the national numbers were presented more objectively. Florida is the proverbial melting pot of drivers, with not only a wide variety of American but many foreign driving styles as well.

For the record, the three leading causes of fatal accidents in the United States are: (1) Inattention or Careless Driving, (2) Failure to Yield and (3) DWI. When accounting for all accidents, DWI falls from the third spot. In Florida, "other" takes the third position. "Following too closely" and "improper lane change" cause significant amounts of crashes but are often under reported, or called "other."

Like red-light running, true speeding is not, never has been, or ever will be a significant cause of traffic accidents.

Motorists across the nation owe a debt of gratitude to the National Motorists Association. On November 28, 1995, NMA inspired legislation, signed by President Clinton, repealed the most disobeyed law in U.S. history - the 55/65 MPH National Maximum Speed Limit (NMSL). Speed limit powers were returned to the states, unencumbered by Federal restrictions. Two dozen states poised to raise their freeway speed limits for 1996.

A great hue and cry arose from the insurance funded "safety" groups and NHTSA. "Over 6,400 lives would be lost!" they proclaimed. The NMA predicted there would occur no additional loss of life. The predictions of highway carnage proved to be completely unfounded.

NHTSA and the IIHS scrambled to manufacture studies proving there occurred at least some highway mayhem. Between the two, the IIHS manipulated the most from selectively chosen data. They claimed "500 lives" lost or "15% increases in fatalities on interstates and freeways" resulted from 36 states raising their speed limits between 1996-1997. My subsequent research, published in the November/December 1999 issue of the NMA News, completely refuted their flawed assertions.

The following chart sets the record straight. There occurred 110 less limited-access-divided-highway fatal crashes in 1997 versus 1995. This equates to 140 less fatalities. Adding 39 billion VMT into the mix, results in the equivalent of 400 lives saved, after speed limit increases, not 500 lives lost.

| 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 |
| <i>(changes 95-'97)</i> | <i>+384</i> | <i>-494</i> | <i>-110</i> | <i>-2%</i> | <i>+59</i> | <i>-6%</i> |

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

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