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DRIVING

# Speed limits set too low

By GREG MAUZ

The government, insurance-funded "safety" groups, police and media insist there is an epidemic of dangerous speeders wreaking havoc on our roadways. They preach that speed limits, especially lower ones, enhance safety, yet claim many drivers cruise 10 miles an hour over the posted limit. Exceeding posted limits causes a huge percentage of accidents, they say. Hence, for our collective "safety," speed enforcement remains the top priority of most police departments.

There is very little truth in all this.

In reality, there occurs an epidemic of unethically underposted speed limits.

The Federal Highway Administration Speed Limit Survey of 1992, completed over five years in 27 states and 256 locations, remains the most comprehensive study ever done on the subject. Conclusions include:

- More than 90 percent of speed limits are set too low.

- Speed limits have no real effect on highway speeds or safety and need to be set according to engineering data, not political mandate.

The survey states: "Properly established speed limits foster voluntary compliance."

The correct method for setting a speed limit involves a traffic engineering study to measure and determine the free-flow travel speeds on a given road. The limit should then be posted at the 85th percentile speed — the speed at or below which 85 percent of people drive. This is the proper, scientific, democratic limit.

Crash rate studies looking at deviation from average speed consistently prove that, on most roads, from 5- to 10-mph above average (or 12 on freeways) reflects the safest travel speeds.

The slowest drivers crash the most, not the fastest. Contrary to "speed kills" propaganda, only 1.77 percent of all drivers in 1998 crashes were assigned "speed too fast" as a contributing cause, according to Florida Traffic Crash Facts. Discounting second and third factors, plus weather-caused accidents, further diminishes the already low numbers.

## Speed limit is the problem

Although a small percentage of motorists truly drive too fast, the vast majority cruise at reasonable and safe speeds. However, the safe travel speeds often exceed the posted speed limits. The so-called speeding problem is, in fact, a speed limit problem.

Most of Boca and Delray speed limits remain illegitimately posted according to the proper engineering standards. The correct method for setting a speed limit involves measuring free flow travel speed on a given

road. The limit should then be posted at the 85th percentile speed — the speed at or below which 85 percent of motorists drive. This happens to be the universally accepted, proper, scientific, democratic, and safest speed for posting the limit.

If the goal to increase compliance and improve safety, then speed limits should be posted in the range of the 85th percentile rule. The current limits suggest Boca and Delray have ulterior motives. In Palm Beach County failure to yield, resulting in a crash, nets a \$78 fine. Speeding 20 mph over the limit on the interstate, endangering nobody, results in a \$168 fine. Justice? Safety?

As rap musicians often say, "It's all about the Benjamin's" — in other words, the money.

**Greg Mauz**

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Lower speed limits cannot enhance safety. More than three years after the repeal of the 55-mph limit, and with 40 states raising theirs, there have been about 500 fewer fatalities on all U.S. freeways. Montana achieved a record safe year in 1996, with no daytime speed limit.

So why do police spend 60 percent of their time writing speeding tickets, as compared to all other moving violations?

Money. Each speeding fine feeds 12 government agencies, with about half benefitting the locality of the infraction.

Florida police wrote 733,087 speeding citations in 1997, netting more than \$95 million. Add more for "driving school." All states combined took over \$2 billion, and insurance another \$6 billion.

In Florida, failure to yield and crashing into someone receives a \$78 fine.

Speeding 20 mph over the limit — and most limits are underposted by 15 mph or more — while driving safely results in a \$168 fine. Justice? Safety?

It's time for this "safety" façade to meet the wrecking ball. Pass the Model Speed Zoning Bill, which would require setting properly engineered 85th-90th percentile speed limits.

*The National Motorists Association's address is 402 W. Second St., Waunakee, WI 53597. On the web at: [www.motorists.org](http://www.motorists.org); or phone 608-849-6000.*