

Problem Statement

Travel at safe and reasonable speeds on highways promotes the nation's productivity. Most highways and motor vehicles are designed and built for safe operation at the speeds traveled by most motorists. Speeding -- exceeding posted limits or driving too fast for conditions -- involves many factors including public attitudes, personal behavior, vehicle performance, roadway characteristics, enforcement strategies, and speed zoning (a safe and reasonable limit for a given road section or zone). Nevertheless, speeding on the nation's roadways is a contributing factor in as many as one third of all fatal crashes. Fatal crashes are only a small part of the total safety picture. In addition, many people are injured in speed-related crashes. The economic cost to society of these crashes was estimated to be \$27.7 billion per year in 1998.

Federal Policy on Speeding

Speeding is a significant threat to public safety and warrants priority attention. The Department of Transportation's policy on highway speeds is to provide guidance to state and local governments to set speed limits that maximize the efficient and rapid transportation of people and goods while eliminating the unnecessary risk of crashes due to unsafe speeds. This policy promotes the concept that federal, state, and local governments should have balanced programs that use the most cost-effective strategies for decreasing crash risks from speeding. These strategies include: (1) ensuring that posted speed limits are reasonable and appropriate for conditions; (2) providing public information and education on the risks associated with speeding; (3) understanding who speeds, where, when, and why; (4) using a variety of techniques and technologies beyond enforcement for speed management; and (5) targeting enforcement where speeding presents the most serious hazard and accompanying it with public information and education.

Speed Management Program and Implementation

The following are the key elements of a balanced program to implement the speed policy at the federal, state, and local levels.

1. Speed Limits

Speed limits should promote safe travel, and should be perceived by the public as safe and reasonable. If the public does not understand the consequences of speeding to themselves and others, they are less likely to adjust speeds for traffic and weather conditions, or to comply with posted speed limits. This can place serious strains on the limited resources that are available for speed enforcement and on the relationship between the police and the public. Voluntary compliance with speed limits can also be improved through greater use of speed management devices and techniques that can be built into the existing highway system, as well as incorporated in the Intelligent Transportation System.

Objectives:

- Develop speed zoning guidelines with the states and local entities to use in establishing safe and reasonable speed limits on their roadways through a multi-discipline team review of existing speed-setting criteria.
- Work with states and local governments to promote increased use of condition responsive speed and hazard warning systems that give motorists information on appropriate speeds for the prevailing environmental, traffic and roadway conditions.
- Encourage states and local governments to use speed zoning guidelines and, where appropriate, revise posted speed limits to reasonable levels, and/or adopt variable speed limits. Encourage states and local governments to increase the use of physical speed management and perceptual techniques (i.e., speed humps, rumble strips, pavement markings) in locations where speed has been shown to pose a serious hazard. Use of these counter-measures will vary by highway type.
- Encourage states and local governments to consider relevant design factors and design speed prior to changing posted speed limits. Many factors, such as congestion and environment, can impact speed limits.

2. Education, Public Information and Enforcement

State and local enforcement should focus on the types of drivers and situations where speeding has a significant impact on public safety. Speed enforcement must be complemented by focused public information and education campaigns. Research shows that compliance with, and support for, traffic laws can be increased through aggressive, targeted enforcement combined with a vigorous public information and education program. This approach has been successful in addressing impaired driving, occupant protection, red-light running, and commercial motor vehicle safety issues. Public information and education also contribute to public support for speed management by increasing the awareness of the consequences of speeding.

Objectives:

- Broaden federal, state, and local speed management programs to include public information and education in coordination with enforcement.
- Target enforcement programs to high crash locations where speeding was a contributing factor.
- Target public information and education programs to specific aspects of the speeding problem such as young drivers, males, nighttime, adverse weather and traffic conditions, impaired driving, school zones, work zones, and roads and streets with major potential conflicts in traffic and with pedestrians.
- Encourage states and local governments to monitor speed limit compliance and examine the relationship of crashes to speed and the effect on health care and public costs.
- Integrate speed management programs into related highway safety activities, such as impaired driving, youth initiatives, and commercial vehicle safety.
- Develop and target specific education campaigns focused on judges and prosecutors, elected officials, law enforcement, corporations, and engineers to educate them on the inherent dangers of driving too fast or too slow for conditions.

3. Research and Demonstration

An effective and efficient program to address speeding as a highway safety issue requires better definition and understanding of speeding and its management. It is important to identify any specific characteristics or traits that can be used to target drivers and situations where there is increased risk. Detailed information on why these drivers speed can be used to develop more effective countermeasures. Voluntary compliance with speed limits can also be improved through on-going development of new speed management technologies.

Objectives:

- Better define the speed problem. Determine when, where, and under what conditions speeding leads to crashes; the demographics of drivers who speed in these situations; and why they speed.
- Develop advanced technologies to address speed including variable speed limit systems, vehicle-based radar warning systems, and less labor intensive methods of speed enforcement. Promising approaches should be tested and demonstrated.
- Examine the effect of fines and sanctions on habitual offenders and explore the use of alternative techniques to increase compliance.
- Examine the effect of corporate policies which may encourage speeding and explore appropriate sanctions.
- Analyze the effects of road design, the vehicle and the environment on safe operating speeds.
- Develop and study the effects of traffic calming techniques on speed and crashes.



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**

DOT HS 809 130
August 2000



Speeding and Highway Safety

The U.S. Department of Transportation's
Policy and Implementation Strategy

For More Information:

Contact the Traffic Law Enforcement Division
at (202) 366-4295.