Headline: Study: raising speed limits lessens safety

Deckhead: AAA research finds it has minimal effect on saving time

Motorists who desire quicker commutes might consider higher speed limits to be a boon. But is it the safest choice? Does it put pedestrians, cyclists and others at greater risk?

A new study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found higher speed limits to be a danger. They have minimal effect on saving time and increasing traffic flow but could lead to more crashes, injuries and deaths.

The AAA Foundation’s research results varied across all 12 roadway sites examined. All had new posted speed limits – six raised and six lowered – and included various road types. Raising posted speed limits increased crashes on two interstate highways. But lowering the posted speed limits resulted in fewer crashes.

The likelihood of speed-limit violations increased after lowering posted speed limits, suggesting the need for better public-awareness education tied to these changes. AAA urges transportation officials to apply a “holistic” approach when setting or changing posted speed limits and prioritizing safety over speed and capacity.

“Our study analyzed before-and-after data on a dozen roadways that raised or lowered posted speed limits and found no one-size-fits-all answer regarding the impact of these changes,” said Dr. David Yang, president and executive director of the AAA Foundation. “However, it is critical to consider the safety implications when local transportation authorities contemplate making changes with posted speed limits.”

Speeding is a critical factor in vehicle crashes nationwide. National Highway Safety Administration reports there were more than 42,000 traffic deaths in 2021 and again in 2022 – the highest levels in 16 years. It also reported that speeding played a factor in nearly 29% of the fatalities in 2021 and 27% in 2022.

Key findings in the Foundation’s study:

* Raising posted speed limits was associated with increased crash frequencies and rates for two of the three interstate highways examined.
* Lowering posted speed limits was associated with decreased crash frequencies and rates for one of the two principal arterials examined.
* Changes in travel times were small in response to raised and lowered speed limits.

AAA recommends that changes in posted speed limits should consider range factors. Including but not limited to the type of road, surrounding land use and historical-crash data. AAA supports automated-speed enforcement, but programs must be carefully implemented to maintain community support, prioritize equity and consistently drive improved safety.

“The movement in statehouses to raise speed limits is happening across the country in at least eight states this year,” said Jennifer Ryan, director of state relations for AAA. “But the benefits are overrated, and the risks are understated. Increasing speed limits does not always yield the positive results envisioned by traffic planners.”

The study is the third phase of the AAA Foundation research examining the effect of posted speed-limit changes on safety. In the first study, traffic engineers were asked how posted speed limits are set and what factors they should consider in changing them. In the second phase, crash testing revealed that small speed increases have a severe and potentially deadly effect on crash outcomes.

Cutline: SLOW DOWN – AAA research found that raising the speed limit isn’t worth the risk. Image: Condor 36. Adobe Stock.