



State law sets Washington's basic speed law, as well as the maximum speed limits for state highways, county roads and city streets. The law also authorizes agencies to raise or lower these maximum speed limits, when supported by an engineering and traffic investigation.

Setting speed limits

Setting speed limits is a technical science backed by many years of research and experience on what works and doesn't work to keep traffic safely moving. We often hear from citizens who feel that a change in the posted speed limit will help improve safety on a specific highway. Safety is always our highest concern; however, our data and experience show that lowering speed limits does not always lead to safer roadways.

The "85th percentile speed"

Research and experience have shown that effective speed limits are those that the majority of motorists naturally drive, and that raising and lowering speed limits doesn't substantially influence that speed. Speed limits are determined by what engineers call the "85th percentile speed," or the speed that 85 out of 100 vehicles travel at or below.

The 85th percentile speed is based on the principle that reasonable drivers will consider road conditions when selecting their speed of travel. This method is based on several fundamental concepts that have proven true over the years:

- The majority of motorists drive in a safe and reasonable manner
- The normally careful and competent actions of a reasonable person should be considered to be legal
- Laws are established for the protection of the public and the regulation of unreasonable behavior of a few individuals
- Laws cannot be effectively enforced without the consent and voluntary compliance of the majority

Engineers also consider other factors when setting speed limits, including roadway characteristics, roadside development and lighting, parking practices, collisions rates, and traffic volume trends.

But if you lower the speed limits, won't people drive slower?

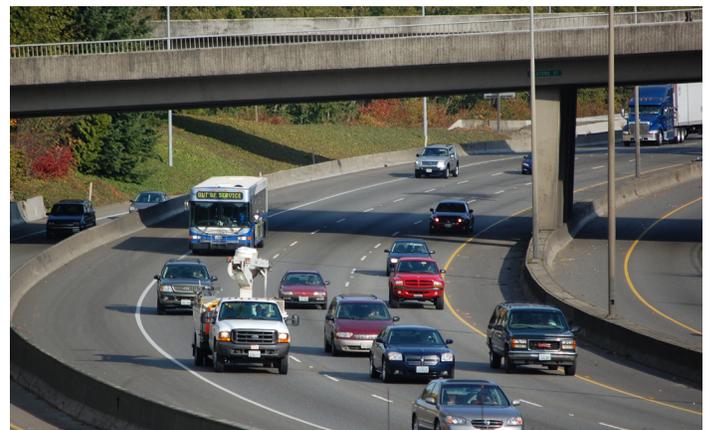
The answer is no. People also won't automatically drive faster when the speed limit is raised. These are common misconceptions, along with the mistaken belief that speed limit signs will decrease the collision rate and that highways with posted speed limits are safer than those without posted speed limit signs.

Again, our experience shows that most drivers base their speed of travel on current road conditions. Studies have consistently shown that there are no significant changes in the 85th percentile speed when speed limits are modified.

What if the majority of drivers are going too fast?

Highways are more dangerous when drivers are traveling at varying speeds. We set speed limits at the 85th percentile speed to reduce the range of speeds. This means more vehicles are traveling at or near the same speed, with fewer vehicles traveling at extremely high or low speeds.

Our data shows that roadways with speed limits set at the 85th percentile speed have fewer collisions than roads where the posted speed limit is above or below what the majority of drivers naturally travel.



Realistic speed limits

Our goal is to set realistic speed limits, based on the 85th percentile speed. Realistic speed limits are better for WSDOT, better for law enforcement, and better for drivers:

- They invite public compliance by conforming to the behavior of the majority and by giving a clear reminder to the non-conforming violators.
- They offer an effective enforcement tool to law enforcement by clearly separating the occasional violator from the reasonable majority.
- They tend to minimize antagonism toward enforcement of unreasonable regulations.
- They inject an element of logic and reason into an otherwise arbitrary and often emotional issue.



The law and your role as driver

All 50 states have adopted a basic speed law that recognizes that driving conditions vary widely from time to time, and place to place. No set of fixed driving rules will ever adequately serve all conditions. Drivers must constantly adjust their driving behavior to fit the conditions they meet.

The basic speed law is founded on the belief that most motorists are able to modify their driving behavior properly as long as they are alert to the conditions around them. If you are involved in a collision, you can still be cited for driving “too fast for conditions,” even if you are driving below the posted speed limit. Drivers should adjust their speed for the weather and road conditions even if it means driving below the posted limit.

If I think the posted speed limit on a particular highway is wrong, what can I do about it?

If you believe that a posted speed limit is not appropriate for a particular roadway, you can contact the appropriate public agency responsible for the roadway. The agency will conduct engineering and traffic studies to determine whether a change in speed limit is warranted.

The solution is not to change the posted speed limit to an unjustifiably low speed and then expect law enforcement to control violators through constant monitoring.

Who can I contact for more information about speed limits on state highways?

Stephen L. Chick

Traffic Engineer, WSDOT Northwest Region
206-440-4394
chicksl@wsdot.wa.gov