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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/speed-limit-boosts-show-no-signs-of-slowing-down-1521205200>

## THE NUMBERS

# Speed-Limit Boosts Show No Signs of Slowing Down

Safety advocates warn of higher death rates, but people covet quicker trips



A 2012 photo shows a stretch of State Highway 130 near Austin, Texas, where the posted speed limit is 85 mph. PHOTO: RICARDO B. BRAZZIELL/ASSOCIATED PRESS



By

*Jo Craven McGinty*

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Nebraskans who want to put the pedal to the metal may soon be able to floor it—at least on some roads—with the blessing of the state legislature.

A bill introduced in January, and backed by Gov. Pete Ricketts, would raise the state's maximum speed limit to 80 mph, up from 75. Six other states have an 80-mph maximum. A seventh, Texas, has a top limit of 85.

Safety advocates warn that more people die when speed limits rise, but drivers covet faster travel times. In a battle of aphorisms, the Need for Speed seems to be trumping Speed Kills.

For the most part, speed limits in the U.S. have gone in a single direction—up. An exception is Montana, which had no daytime limit for cars for several years in the 1990s but later set the limit at 75.

Nebraska's proposed law would permit the speed limit on certain roadways to increase by 5 mph. In some cases, that would raise the top speed to 65 or 70 mph. But on parts of Interstate 80, including a 50-mile stretch from Omaha to Lincoln, the limit could rise to 80 mph.

Although cutting down on travel time is the major reason given for supporting faster speeds, the savings don't amount to much on most daily trips.

Drivers who maintain a speed of 80 mph over 50 miles would arrive at their destination 2 1/2 minutes sooner than if they drove 75 mph the whole way.

Those willing to break the limit and hurtle down the highway at, say, 89 mph without slowing down would shave around 6 minutes off the trip compared with someone driving 75.

In reality, the savings would likely be less.

Maintaining any rate of speed is harder than it sounds because faster and slower drivers must adjust to one another, and the mix is reflected in average highway speeds.

“For every 5 mph increase in the speed limit, operating speed goes up 1 to 2 mph on average,” said Ivan Cheung, a research analyst at the National Transportation Safety Board.

Saving a few minutes here and there could add up, but it’s not as if the minutes accrue into a usable block of time, like deferred vacation days.

So, in the absence of substantial time savings, why raise the limit?

“One excuse is that people go that fast anyway,” said Chuck Farmer, vice president of research for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Traditionally, speed limits are set within 5 mph of the speed at which 85% of vehicles travel along a roadway in free-flowing traffic.

That guideline dates to the 1940s and is endorsed by the Federal Highway Administration, but the NTSB advocates requiring the use of crash statistics and other factors to set speed limits.

In part, that’s because the operating speed of the 85th percentile is a moving target: It increases as speed limits climb.

In response, some states choose to go with the flow—again and again.

In 2011, Texas raised the speed limit on a segment of State Highway 130 to 75 mph. The next year, it raised it to 80 mph. Soon after, it lifted a portion of the road to 85 mph.

According to estimates by the IIHS, each 5 mph increase in speed limit results in an 8% increase in fatalities on interstates and other freeways.

The most convincing evidence is the 55 mph National Maximum Speed Limit set in 1973. Before that, speed limits on rural interstates typically ranged from 65 to 75 mph.

The lower speed limit was implemented to save fuel, not lives, but in the first year, the National Research Council found that 9,100 fewer people died in motor-vehicle accidents.

The council attributed some of the decrease to economic factors that kept drivers off the road but concluded that 3,000 to 5,000 fewer highway deaths occurred because of the lower speed.

In later years, the trend hasn’t been as easy to discern.

After the national limit was fully repealed in 1995, speed limits began to increase, but traffic fatalities did not.

Comparing those before-and-after numbers has led some analysts to conclude that higher speeds don’t contribute to more traffic deaths—a finding the IIHS and NTSB reject.

“That’s not the comparison you should make,” Dr. Farmer said. “You need to compare states that raised the speed limit to states that did not.”

Safety agencies say safer cars, improved roadways and stricter drunken-driving laws are behind the overall decrease in deaths and that even fewer people would have died if speed limits hadn’t increased.

In its latest study, the IIHS compared the effect of all speed-limit increases from 1993 through 2013 in 41 states and found that 33,000 fewer fatalities would have occurred if there had been no increases.

Nationwide, about 10,000 people die annually in speed-related crashes, yet most drivers seem willing to risk it. Why?

Maybe it’s because, as Dan Rather once observed, Americans will put up with anything provided it doesn’t block traffic.

**Write to Jo Craven McGinty at [Jo.McGinty@wsj.com](mailto:Jo.McGinty@wsj.com)**

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