

RECENT ADVANTAGES OF LOWER SPEED LIMITS IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract: Along with alcohol and fatigue, speed has been identified in Australia as one of the biggest contributors to road traffic accidents. Over time, changing enforcement techniques and technology has been applied with some degree of success in rural and urban areas. From 1997, the speed limits on residential roads were slowly changed from the default 60km/h to 50km/h. By 2003, all but one of the jurisdictions had adopted the new lower speed limit. Although only applying to residential roads and not major roads, considerable crash benefits have been reported. Reductions in the order of 20% in casualty crashes have been observed and in particular, significant benefits appear to exist for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians. This paper discusses some of the research observations surrounding the adoption of the lower speed limit in Australia and discusses the link between overall vehicle speeds and crash frequency based on international literature.

Key Words: Speed limit, crashes, accidents, road safety, countermeasures

1. INTRODUCTION

Travelling above the speed limit is endemic amongst communities in all parts of the world. Excessive speed, along with driving while intoxicated with alcohol, accounts for the majority of road crashes. Enforcement has been the traditional management tool with breath testing and speed detection devices now in common use in many countries. However, such enforcement cannot be everywhere all of the time and a cultural change in behaviour and attitudes is required. Obtaining this change has been one of the hardest challenges facing most countries trying to reduce the trauma on their roads. In the case of speeding, there are many reasons why this is so (Elliott, 2001):

1. The concept of speeding differs between individuals
2. Speed is a graduated measure
3. Speed can be easily measured and enforced; the mass of data quantify the problem
4. There are conflicting messages to society in relation to speeding
5. Roads are engineered to accommodate travelling at the speed limit safely in average conditions
6. There is an issue regarding one's ability not to speed (self efficacy)
7. There are strong personal norms associated with speeding
8. There are strong perceptions that most other drivers are also speeding.

These lead to a culture endorsing speeding and situations where, for example, new car advertising competes against government road safety messages. The final three points relate to the way in which speeding behaviour is justified (Elliott 2001). Self-efficacy relates to the

