

Higher speed limits lead to more deaths

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States that raised their speed limits to 70 mph or more have seen a big jump in traffic deaths, according to a report by an auto safety group.

Some 1,880 more people died between 1996 and 1999 in the 22 states with higher speed limits on rural interstates, said the study, compiled by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, funded by insurers. It was based on data collected by the Land Transport Safety Authority of New Zealand. Congress repealed the 55 mph national speed limit in November 1995.

An institute researcher said New Zealand did the study because groups are questioning whether to raise the country's speed limit, which is 100 kilometers per hour — about 62 mph.

In September 1996, Nebraska set the speed limit at 75 miles per hour for rural interstates. Colorado, South Dakota and Wyoming also allow 75. Kansas and Missouri allow 70.

"There's a significant societal cost," said Allan Williams, the institute's chief scientist, who said drivers often think a speeding ticket is the worst that can happen.

Supporters of higher speed limits pointed out that federal highway data show the nation's vehicle fatality rate fell each year from 1996 and 1999, from 1.69 deaths per million miles traveled to 1.55 deaths.

"We've moved toward a transportation system where cars are a lot safer and there are better measures like guard rails on highways," said Stephen Moore, a proponent of limited government and president of the Club for Growth. "We've made it safer to drive at faster speeds."

Institute researcher Susan Ferguson agreed that other factors are making highways safer, and that the nation's death rate dropped as a whole. But she said the study expands upon institute studies from the late 1990s, which showed a 12 to 15 percent increase in deaths when speed limits rise.

The study said the 10 states that raised limits to 75 mph — all in the Midwest and West — had 38 percent more deaths per million miles driven than states with 65-mph limits. That's approximately 780 more deaths.

The 12 states which raised their limits to 70 mph saw a 35 percent increase — some 1,100 additional deaths.

The report didn't examine the effects of other trends, such as the tendency to drive faster in rural states where cities are far apart. Nor did it analyze the increasing number of sport utility vehicles on the road in the late 1990s.

A separate review of six states by the institute found drivers are traveling faster than any time since the institute began collecting data in 1987. Researchers observed in Colorado, which has a 75-mph speed limit, one in four drivers going above 80 mph. In California, where the speed limit is 70 mph, one in five drivers was clocked at 80 mph.

The institute's study of speeds in Georgia, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Mexico, Colorado and California also found that when rates are raised on rural interstates, speeding increased on urban interstates.

Average travel speeds on urban interstates in Atlanta, Boston and Washington were the same as or higher than on rural interstates near those cities, even though the speed limits on those urban interstates were 55 mph. In Atlanta, 78 percent of drivers on one urban interstate exceeded 70 mph, the report found.

Institute President Brian O'Neill said tolerance of speeding and advertising that encourages drivers to speed is part of the problem.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is at www.iihs.org □