

California Speed Limits

Setting speed limits

This is how speed limits are set in California, which means the law depends on how fast *you* drive!¹

California Manual for Setting Speed Limits

Speed limit determinations rely on the premise that a reasonable speed limit is one that conforms to the actual behavior of the majority of drivers; one will be able to select a speed limit that is both reasonable and effective by measuring drivers' speeds. Speed limits set by E&TS are normally set near the 85th percentile speed. The 85th percentile speed is the speed at or below which 85 percent of the traffic is moving, and statistically represents one standard deviation above the average speed.

The 85th percentile rule is designed to fail because

1. Speed limits conform to drivers instead of drivers conforming to safety goals
2. Most people “go with the speed of traffic” which is often 5-15 miles above the posted limit → this leads to increasing the 85th percentile → increased speed limits

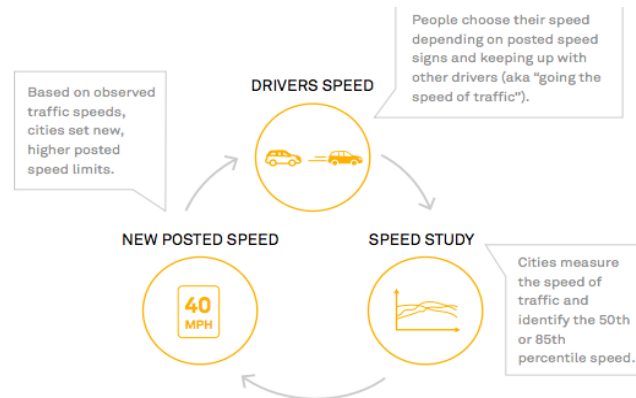


Figure 1 Reference: NACTO https://nacto.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NACTO_CityLimits_SinglePages.pdf

Changing speed limits

- In California, the Zero Traffic Fatalities Task Force² was created to review the way speed limits are set and they've recently published a report³ (Recommended next steps can be found on pages 54-66)
- 20 is Plenty is an organization that sets up campaigns to reduce speed limits. Click the link to see how you can take action. <http://www.20splenty.org/>

¹ <https://dot.ca.gov/-/media/dot-media/programs/traffic-operations/documents/2019-california-manual-for-setting-speed-limits-a11y.pdf>

² <https://calsta.ca.gov/subject-areas/enforcement-and-safety/zero-traffic-fatalities>

³ <https://calsta.ca.gov/-/media/calsta-media/documents/calsta-report-of-findings-ab-2363-zero-traffic-fatalities-task-force-a11y.pdf>

Why should we lower speed limits?

According to NACTO, crashes are more likely to occur at high speeds than at lower speeds and are more deadly because:



- Driving at high speeds requires more distance to stop and limits the driver’s field of vision and react time
- Collisions are more forceful at higher speeds

Lowering speed limits will reduce the number of collisions and reduce fatality percentages

How have cities effectively lowered their speed limits?

- Seattle, as part of its Vision Zero Action Plan (Greenways Program)^{4 5} reduced speed limit by 16% (5mph), which led to a reduction in 85th percentile speed (without additional law enforcement) by 3mph and 30% decrease in crashes. It took *less than two months* to put this in place. This was funded by the Levy to Move Seattle Fund.
- Toronto, Canada, as part of its Vision Zero Plan⁶ reduced the speed limit by 25% (10kph), which led to a 28% decline in collisions and a 67% decline in traffic-crash related fatalities. This was an incremental, multi-year plan, with a process that is ongoing. Funding comes from the “Capital Budget & Plan for Transportation Services”. Check out Toronto’s Speed Limit Reductions page.⁷



Figure 2: Toronto’s speed reduction campaign

⁴ <https://www.seattle.gov/visionzero/projects>

⁵ https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/beSuperSafe/VZ_FAQ_Flyer.pdf

⁶ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2019/ie/bgrd/backgroundfile-134964.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/road-safety/vision-zero/safety-initiatives/speed-limit-reductions/>