



The Great Bike Infrastructure Project

Supplemental Guide for Reducing Traffic Speeds

Reducing the speed of vehicles is one of the most effective ways to make streets safer for everyone. When *actual speeds* are 20 to 25 miles per hour, crashes and fatalities decrease and shared streets become safe and welcoming places for people to walk and bike. This is why communities worldwide have changed speed limits and street designs to lower vehicle speeds to 20 miles per hour.

The Great Bike Infrastructure Project [Legislative Strategies Guide](#) includes links to some of the best examples of policy changes communities have made to reduce speeds. This supplemental guide will help you implement these changes in your community.

Why Reduce Speeds?

Lowering speed limits reduces speeding.

- A study of New York City's "neighborhood slow zones," where speed limits were lowered from 25 mph to 20 mph, showed that vehicle speeds decreased by 10-15%.¹
- In addition to results from Seattle, two newer studies in Portland and Boston shed light on the effectiveness of lowering speed limits, refuting older studies that failed to show changes in driver behavior. Furthermore, while the newer studies showed limited reductions in the overall average speed of drivers, they noted dramatic decreases in the highest speeds. The odds of a driver speeding more than 10 mph over the speed limit dropped by 29% in Boston² and 50% in Portland.³

Lower speeds save lives and reduce life-changing serious injuries for all road users.

¹ [Neighborhood Slow Zones](#) (NYC DOT)

² ["City drivers slow down for lower speed limit in Boston"](#) (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2018)

³ [Analysis indicates 20 mph speed limit reduced driving speeds](#) (Portland Bureau of Transportation, 2020)

- **Speeding is a significant cause of crashes.** Speeding was a factor in 29% of all traffic fatalities in 2021, killing more than 33 people per day.⁴
- **At slower speeds, crashes are less frequent and less deadly.** Traveling at slower speeds gives drivers a broader field of vision to see other cars and people walking and biking, as well as more time to react and brake.⁵ Crash fatality increases exponentially with speed: a person hit by a vehicle traveling at 35 mph is *five times more likely to die* than a person hit by a vehicle traveling at 20 mph.⁶ After lowering speed limits in downtown Seattle from 30 mph to 25 mph on arterial roads and from 25 mph to 20 mph on smaller streets in 2016, a recent study showed a 20% reduction in the odds of injury, among other results⁷. The study of New York City's "neighborhood slow zones" showed that injuries to drivers and passengers dropped by 31% and all injuries dropped 14%.

Lowering speed limits benefits the economy.

- **Speeding and related crashes are expensive, even for people not involved in crashes.** The direct and indirect cost of traffic violence in the U.S. in 2019 was \$340 billion. Roughly three-quarters of these costs are endured by those not directly involved in crashes, through insurance premiums, taxes, as well as fuel, time, and environmental costs related to the resulting congestion. *Speeding-related crashes accounted for \$46 billion*, or 14% of those total costs. This means an average of \$141 for every person in the United States is spent on crashes resulting from speeding annually.⁸
- **Speed-related crashes cost lives and contribute to productivity losses.** Road crashes are the leading cause of on-the-job deaths in the U.S., accounting for 36% of these deaths in 2015. Millions more are injured on U.S. roadways.⁹ While the human cost of these deaths and injuries is incalculable, in 2019, these crashes caused an estimated \$106 billion in workplace and household productivity losses.¹⁰
- **Slower speed limits don't negatively impact businesses.** Studies have found that streets that are more inviting for people walking and biking are more vibrant and economically successful than streets with high volumes of fast-moving traffic.¹¹

⁴ [National Safety Council \(NSC\) analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration \(NHTSA\) Fatality Analysis Reporting System \(FARS\) data.](#)

⁵ [How Speed Kills](#) (National Association of City Transportation Officials)

⁶ [Speed Kills](#) (National Association of City Transportation Officials)

⁷ [Lowering speed limits makes Seattle streets safer](#) (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2023)

⁸ [NHTSA: Traffic Crashes Cost America \\$340 Billion in 2019](#) (NHTSA, 2023)

⁹ [Investing in Road Safety: A Global Imperative for the Private Sector](#) (Together For Safer Roads 2015)

¹⁰ [The Economic and Societal Impact of Motor Vehicle Crashes, 2019 \(Revised\)](#) (NHTSA, 2023)

¹¹ [The Economic Benefits of Sustainable Streets](#) (New York Department of Transportation, 2014)

Lowering speed limits does not increase travel times for people driving.

- A July 2023 study by AAA observed 12 highways over several years and concluded that lowering the posted speed limit by 5 mph decreases crash frequency while having little to no effect on travel times.¹²

Injuries from speeding reinforce existing socioeconomic disparities.

- Low-income residents are most likely to live on streets with fast-moving traffic and more likely to walk, bike, and wait for public transit, putting them disproportionately at risk of speeding vehicles.¹³

How to Reduce Speeds

Make sure your state allows local governments to lower speed limits, including a default speed limit of 20 mph.

Most states have laws that govern how speed limits are set, what the default speed limit is on streets without speed limit signs, and how low speed limits can be set. Typically, as with roadway design, these laws tend to be very permissive of speeding in excess of the speeds necessary to ensure the safety of all road users. Elected officials in several states have begun to change these laws.

Take Action: Contact your state legislators and request that the state allow cities to lower speed limits if it isn't already allowed in your state. Reference our legislative guide for examples of how leading states changed these laws.

- In 2022, Washington ([SB 5687](#)) allowed local authorities to establish a 20 mph speed limit on most streets.
- In Oregon, the state legislature enabled the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to delegate the authority to set speed limits to several cities and counties across the state, dependent on ODOT approval ([HB 3055, 2021](#)).
- In 2021, California law ([AB 43](#)) changed to permit local authorities to reduce the speed limit by 5 mph below what would have been required by previous law and dropped the lowest allowable speed limit in defined districts from 25 mph to 15 mph.

¹² [A Multi-site Examination for the Impact of Changes in Posted Speed Limit on Traffic Safety](#) (AAA, July 2023)

¹³ [Neighborhood Social Inequalities in Road Traffic Injuries](#) (National Library of Medicine, 2021)

- In 2018, Colorado ([HB 1191, 2018](#)) also dropped the lowest allowable speed limit to 20 mph on certain streets.
- [In 2019](#), Minnesota legislators gave cities the authority to set speed limits on most streets, eliminating the typical requirement to set the speed limit close to the speed of the fastest drivers. Cities may now use [best practices](#) to set lower speed limits.

Lower your city or town's default speed limit to 20 mph.

Take Action: Contact your city officials and request lower speed limits in your neighborhood or city. Our legislative guide provides some of the best examples of the many cities that are lowering speed limits.

- [Nashville, TN](#), lowered its default speed from 30 mph to 25 mph in 2021.
- [Tacoma, WA](#), did the same in 2021 for some specific arterial streets and went further on non-arterial streets, lowering the default speed to 20 mph.
- [Eugene, OR](#), reduced most default speed limits to 20 mph in 2020, with [Denver, CO](#), doing the same a year later.
- [San Francisco, CA](#), reduced the speed limit to 20 mph on 17 corridors, including busy commercial districts and some entire neighborhoods.

Redesign roads for slower speeds.

Lowering speed limits is an important first step because it reduces the most dangerous driving and saves lives, but redesigning roadways to reduce speeding is an important next step. Reduced speed limits set the expectation of lower speeds that will build support for design changes that are even more effective.

The most effective way to reduce speeds is to design roads that make speeding difficult or impossible. This requires a departure from past design manuals that emphasized safety for speeding drivers at the expense of everyone else. The National Association of City Transportation Officials provides [new design guidance](#) for physical and visual elements to slow drivers.

Take Action: Make sure your city officials use [NACTO's design guides](#) instead of older, car-oriented guidelines and make sure your state allows local officials to use NACTO's

design guides, as some states prohibit deviations from older manuals. Our legislative guide provides several great examples:

- The California Legislature passed a law ([AB 1193, 2014](#)) allowing cities to use alternative safety design criteria for bikeways.
- The South Carolina Department of Transportation issued [internal departmental guidance](#) allowing NACTO design standards (see page 4).
- Among many others, the City of Hoboken, NJ, adopted NACTO's design guides as its bikeway and street design guides [in 2013](#). El Paso, TX, did so [in 2014](#).

For more detailed information, we suggest reading [Injury Minimization and Speed Management](#) (2020). Prepared by a Washington State policy working group, the report highlights research that positions lowering speed limits as a critical path to road safety.