



Speeding Around the Block: Families are More at Risk on Local Roads than Highways

Public perception tends to view speeding as a highway problem. Every night on TV news programs, families see huge, fiery crashes on the interstate. Because of this, many families assume they are most at risk on the highways.

But this is not so, according to John Ulczycki, director of the National Safety Council's Transportation Safety Group. Motorists, their families and the people around them often are most at risk right in their own neighborhoods.

"Speeding is a much more serious problem on city streets and local roads, and the impact of speeding is much greater on city streets and local roads," Ulczycki said.

A National Highway Traffic Safety Administration study released in 2005 confirmed the number of speeding-related deaths was highest on arterial roads, followed by local/collector roads. Interstate highways came in last.

Busy roads lined with residential houses are among the most dangerous problem areas, Ulczycki said. These roads offer a mixture of commuters, pedestrians, schoolchildren and bicyclists. Rarely does either one see the road the same way.

Case in point, Ulczycki said opinion polls show most people believe speeding is a problem in their neighborhood and would like to see speeds reduced. However, in many cases the same people thought speed limits should be higher in other parts of their community.

"Chances are if you are speeding on a local road, then you are speeding through somebody's neighborhood. Yet people don't think about it that way. They are thinking about how the speed limit should be higher or how they are late for work," Ulczycki said. Drivers need to understand speed limits are not based exclusively on the whims and fancies of local government, nor are they based exclusively on engineering of the road itself. A host of science-based factors come into play in setting a speed limit, Ulczycki said, including the number of residences, vehicles' stopping ability, proximity of schools and levels of traffic congestion.

Who are these speeders?

According to a 2004 survey of drivers by the Mayfield Village, OH-based Progressive Insurance Co., 90 percent of respondents admitted exceeding the speed limit, so chances are you or someone you know exceed the speed limit regularly. In many cases, drivers don't understand the risks they are taking when they speed. NHTSA cites speeding in 32 percent of traffic fatalities, costing an estimated \$40 billion each year – including wage and productivity losses, medical expenses, legal costs, insurance costs, police department costs, and property damage.

According to the Governors Highway Safety Association, a Washington-based nonprofit, the effects of excess speed can be disastrous. Speed:

- Reduces a driver's ability to negotiate curves or maneuver around obstacles in the roadway
- Extends the distance necessary for the vehicle to stop
- Increases the distance a vehicle travels while the driver reacts to a hazard



- Compromises the integrity of the vehicle structure
- Decreases the effectiveness of vehicle design features, such as air bags and restraint systems
- Decreases the ability of roadway hardware, such as guardrails, barriers and impact attenuators to protect occupants
- Increases tread wear on tires and wear on braking systems
- Increases the risk of crashes because other vehicles and pedestrians may not be able to judge distance accurately

5 mph makes a difference

What motivates drivers to press a little harder on the gas? They do it for a host of reasons, including busy schedules, over-confidence in driving ability and sometimes just plain selfishness. The biggest reason is probably they think they won't get caught. According to Ulczycki, vigilant enforcement of speed limits is the best deterrent against speeding.

However, most drivers believe, and some law enforcement agencies admit, a grace area exists of about 5 to 7 mph above the posted speed limit. Traffic police in some communities most likely will not stop a driver doing "35 in a 30." A likely reason for this is radar equipment and passenger vehicle speedometers have a combined margin of error of about 5 mph, Ulczycki said.

But what impact does this 5 mph have on safety? The difference between life and death, according to recent findings by researchers at the Monash University Accident Research Center in Victoria, Australia. Researchers found through simulated tests that when a child darted in front of a passenger car traveling 30 mph, the car was able to stop suddenly. At 35 mph, the car struck and killed the child.

The bottom line of research like this is that the most dangerous threat to American families is not terrorism, Mad Cow Disease, West Nile virus or avian influenza, but the belief "It can't happen to me." The person with this attitude does nothing to protect him- or herself, not to mention the people around them, and this lack of vigilance places everyone at risk.

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