

Safe at Any Speed

With higher speed limits, our highways have been getting safer.

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It's another summer weekend, when millions of families pack up the minivan or SUV and hit the road. So this is also an apt moment to trumpet some good, and underreported, news: Driving on the highways is safer today than ever before.

In 2005, according to new data from the National Highway Safety Administration, the rate of injuries per mile traveled was lower than at any time since the Interstate Highway System was built 50 years ago. The fatality rate was the second lowest ever, just a tick higher than in 2004.

As a public policy matter, this steady decline is a vindication of the repeal of the 55 miles per hour federal speed limit law in 1995. That 1974 federal speed limit was arguably the most disobeyed and despised law since Prohibition. "Double nickel," as it was often called, was first adopted to save gasoline during the Arab oil embargo, though later the justification became saving lives. But to Westerners with open spaces and low traffic density, the law became a symbol of the heavy hand of the federal nanny state. To top it off, Congress would deny states their own federal highway construction dollars if they failed to comply.



In repealing the law, the newly minted Republican majority in Congress declared that states were free to impose their own limits. Many states immediately took up this nod to federalism by raising their limits to 70 or 75 mph. Texas just raised its speed limit again on rural highways to 80.

This may seem non-controversial now, but at the time the debate was shrill and filled with predictions of doom. Ralph Nader claimed that "history will never forgive Congress for this assault on the sanctity of human life." **Judith Stone, president of the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety**, predicted to Katie Couric on NBC's "Today Show" that there would be "6,400 added highway fatalities a year and millions of more injuries." Federico Pena, the Clinton Administration's Secretary of Transportation, declared: "Allowing speed limits to rise above 55 simply means that more Americans will die and be injured on our highways."

Higher Speed Limits, More Safety

	1995	2005	% DECLINE
Highway fatality rate*	1.73	1.46	16%
Injuries*	143	90	37
Crashes*	560	375	33
Pedestrian deaths	5,584	4,674	16

*Per 100 million vehicle miles traveled

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2006

We now have 10 years of evidence proving that the only "assault" was on the sanctity of the truth. The nearby table shows that the death, injury and crash rates have fallen sharply since 1995. Per mile traveled, there were about 5,000 fewer deaths and almost one million fewer injuries in 2005 than in the mid-1990s. This is all the more remarkable given that a dozen years ago Americans lacked today's distraction of driving while also talking on their cell phones.

Of the 31 states that have raised their speed limits to more than 70 mph, 29 saw a decline in the death and injury rate and only two--the Dakotas--have seen fatalities increase. Two studies, by the National Motorists Association and by the Cato Institute, have compared crash data in states that raised their speed limits with those that didn't and found no increase in deaths in the higher speed states.

Jim Baxter, president of the National Motorists Association, says that by the early 1990s "compliance with the 55 mph law was only about 5%--in other words, about 95% of drivers were exceeding the speed limit." Now motorists can coast at these faster speeds without being on the constant lookout for radar guns, speed traps and state troopers. Americans have also arrived at their destinations sooner, worth an estimated \$30 billion a year in time saved, according to the Cato study.



The tragedy is that 43,000 Americans still die on the roads every year, or about 15 times the number of U.S. combat deaths in Iraq. Car accidents remain a leading cause of death among teenagers in particular. The Interstate Highway System is nonetheless one of the greatest public works programs in American history, and the two-thirds decline in road deaths per mile traveled since the mid-1950s has been a spectacular achievement. Tough drunk driving laws, better road technology, and such improving auto safety features as power steering and brakes are all proven life savers.

We are often told, by nanny-state advocates, that such public goods as safety require a loss of liberty. In the case of speed limits and traffic deaths, that just isn't so.

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