

Speeding - Did you know?



Transport
Roads & Traffic
Authority

FACT SHEET 2 of 6

Why do we need speed limits?

1. What is a speed limit?

A speed limit is the maximum, legally permissible driving speed along a specific section of road under good road and travel conditions. Speed limits are used in Australia and most countries worldwide, to regulate vehicle speeds. The *Road Transport (Safety and Traffic Management) Act 1999* empowers the Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA) to set the speed limits on New South Wales (NSW) roads through traffic regulations.

2. Why do we need speed limits?

Speed is the biggest single factor involved in road deaths, contributing to around 40 per cent of road fatalities each year in NSW (Click here to view crash statistics on the RTA website). In Australia and worldwide, speed limits are one of the oldest and most proven strategies for controlling driving speeds and are regulated for many reasons, including:

- The actual and potential risks on the road not always being obvious or recognisable.
- Driver decisions about speed being made without adequately considering the effect of their choices on the safety of other road users.
- A driver's inability to judge vehicle capabilities (eg stopping) and to adequately anticipate roadway geometry and roadside conditions to determine appropriate driving speeds.
- Driver misjudgement of the effects of speed on crash probability and severity.
- The wide range of attitudes to risk within the community with many drivers engaging in high risk behaviours, regardless of the consequences.
- The safety benefits of more uniform travel speeds.

Speed limits may also be set in an attempt to reduce the environmental impact of road traffic. Lower speeds reduce vehicle noise, vibration and emissions.

3. Have we always had speed limits in NSW?

Yes we have had speed limits for as long as there have been cars. There have always been speed limits but the values and locations to which they are applied has changed to reflect driving conditions and to improve road safety.

Historically, NSW operated a simple speed limit system of urban (built-up areas) and rural (country/non-built up areas) default limits (see question 4). Originally, the urban default speed limit was 30 miles per hour (48 km/h) and the rural default speed limit was 50 miles per hour (80 km/h, unless it could be shown why it was not unsafe to go faster). Overall, speed limits have increased since then and currently the urban default speed limit is 50 km/h and rural default speed limit is 100 km/h.

Over time, intermediate values have also been used so that speed limits better reflect driver expectations and road improvements. For example there are higher speed limits on arterial roads.

Roads and Traffic Authority of New South Wales

4. What are the types of speed limits in NSW? What is a default speed limit?

Speed limits in NSW are based on a system of:

- Default speed limits, which are statutory speed limits that apply in the absence of speed limit signage and do not require signposting. There are two types of default speed limits - 50 km/h in urban (built-up) areas and 100 km/h in rural (non built-up areas).
- Speed restrictions based on vehicle class (eg, some heavy vehicles) or license class, such as Learner drivers, and;
- Speed zoning – areas requiring speed limits to be signposted. These include 60, 70, 80, 90 and 110 km/h speed zones on road lengths where these speeds have been assessed to be safe.
- Additionally, lower speeds are used to improve the safety of more vulnerable road users for example 40km/h in high pedestrian areas and 10km/h shared zones.

5. What is a speed zone?

A speed zone is a length of road over which a particular speed limit applies. Speed zones are signposted to clearly define where the speed limit applies with signs at the start, reminder signs within the zone and signs at the end showing the speed limit of the next zone.

Despite the signposted speed limits, however, drivers must drive at a speed appropriate for the conditions, meaning it may be necessary to drive at a speed below the posted speed limit depending on the weather, road and/or traffic conditions.

6. Why do we have so many speed zones?

The RTA sets an appropriate speed limit in relation to the risk the road poses. The NSW road network spans a wide range of road types with a variety of transport functions and traffic mixes. Roads also vary widely regarding the possible risks of crashes happening with regard to their physical features. Crash risks might even vary depending on the time of day, the weather, the road geometry (winding, steep grades, blind corners etc.), roadside environment (trees and posts etc.), who is travelling (heavy vehicles, motorcyclists, etc.) and how (traffic volumes, the number and width of lanes, number of side roads or driveways, lane width, shoulder width, etc.) the roads are used.

7. Aren't the fines for exceeding the speed limit, just another form of revenue raising?

Reducing the road toll on NSW roads is the RTA's key objective. It is estimated that speeding related crashes cost the NSW community over \$900M each year in costs to health, emergency services and lost income. Fines from speeding are substantially less than the cost to the community. Fines and demerit points have been shown to be an effective way of managing speed and improving road safety, in Australia and internationally.

In addition, if all road users chose to drive their vehicles within the recommended speed limits, there would be no need for deterrents such as fines and penalties, including the demerit points scheme.

Speed limits are enforced by NSW Police Force and the RTA and fines and demerit points are set by legislation in accordance with the seriousness of the offence. Fines and penalties have also been shown to be an effective deterrent for most drivers to keep within the speed limit in countries where they exist.

For more information on road rules and regulations, visit the RTA website.

8. What is the maximum speed limit in NSW?

The maximum allowable speed limit in NSW is 110 km/h on some motorways and high quality rural roads and low volume remote roads in rural areas.

9. Some countries have higher speed limits. Why not NSW?

Speed limits in NSW are in accordance with international best practice in speed management (see Speed management: a road safety manual for decision-makers and practitioners, WHO, 2008)ⁱ. In comparison with the developed countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australia has relatively high speed limits across much of its road network. A review of international speed limits found that Australia's limits tended to be higher than those found in most OECD countries, including in Europe and North America. (See: Attitudes towards current and lowered speed limits in Australia, Accident Analysis & Prevention, Volume 42, Issue 6, November 2010,).

10. More information/contact details

For more information on speed zones and to 'Have Your Say' on speed limits and speed limit signs, visit the RTA's new Safer Roads NSW website at www.rta.nsw.gov.au. Click here to read the NSW Speed Zoning Guidelines

References:

i World Health Organisation (WHO) (2008), Speed management: a road safety manual for decision-makers and practitioners, Geneva, Global Road Safety Partnership.