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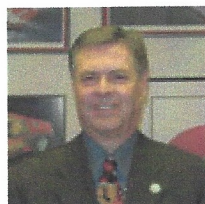
 
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**IMHO** (In My Honest Opinion)

## Seven Major Myths of Speed and Speed Enforcement



By Gary Witzenburg

**January 23, 2003** -- Remember when traffic enforcement was all about safety? When cops made an art of hiding behind bushes and billboards and sneaking up behind people to clock them? When they correctly concentrated on bagging the fastest, most careless, most dangerous offenders?

Then, for a short while during the 1973 fuel crisis, speed limits and enforcement shifted focus from saving lives to saving fuel. The Feds passed a 55-mph National Maximum Speed Limit and blackmailed the states into compliance by threatening to withhold Federal highway funds--money generated by state gas taxes paid by you and me.

The folly of posting 55-mph limits on freeways designed for 75 mph soon became clear to all but the most idealistic, who naively believed that motorists would comply with posted limits no matter how ridiculously low. Or that rigorous enforcement would compel them to.

But most of us continued to travel at safe and prudent speeds that were often well above this ludicrous limit, trading off the ticket risk with the need to get where we were going in reasonable time. We proved once again that while responsible Americans will happily abide by laws that make sense, we will just as happily ignore those that don't. To avoid being ticketed, we became more vigilant and fed a new multimillion-dollar radar detector industry.

This ill-considered experiment in social engineering, which lingered for two decades until the National Motorists Association (NMA) finally convinced Congress to repeal it, created a nation of lawbreakers and diminished respect for speed limits and enforcement in general. It also clearly demonstrated--to states, counties, cities, and every tiny town with enough budget for a radar gun and a sheriff to point it--the enormous revenue potential of speed enforcement, especially when limits are set much lower than necessary for traffic and road conditions. And so it gave birth to another multimillion-dollar industry in speed enforcement and changed the focus forever from safety to revenue generation.

Ask your town or county how much of its revenue comes from traffic courts and what the effect would be if ticket revenue were reduced. Note that traffic fines often run \$100 or more for even the most minor offenses. Note that authorities couch periodic enforcement binges in terms of safety--and that the compliant popular press typically praises and rarely questions them--yet offer only increased ticket and revenue numbers to demonstrate their effectiveness. Try asking for statistics on how much such campaigns actually reduce accident and fatality rates. You won't get any, because they don't.

**Myth #1 - Speed Is a Major Cause of Accidents and Fatalities.** NHTSA says 30% of fatal accidents are "speed related," meaning at least one vehicle was "assumed" to be exceeding the posted limit or traveling too fast for conditions. But such assumptions are meaningless when most traffic is 5-10 mph over limits set unnecessarily low.

A decade ago, authorities in Florida commissioned research to determine where best to concentrate enforcement resources to maximize their safety benefit. Statewide, this 1993 study found "Speed Too Fast" placed a distant fifth on the list of accident causes at just 2.2 percent. A 1994 follow-up study in Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties found 1.5 percent of accidents and seven percent of fatalities "caused by speed." Of nearly

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23,000 accidents investigated in Palm Beach County, approximately 13,000 were attributed to "careless driving," 7,000 to "failure to yield," 2,000 to "improper lane changes," and only 650 to "speed."

This was not welcome news to Florida enforcers, who (like everyone else) continue to focus resources on "speeding" because radar makes it easy and because (as Clyde Barrow once said about banks), that's where the money is. Those other far more significant causes are more difficult to witness, ticket, and prove in court. This is why such studies are seldom undertaken and even more rarely released, which leads us to *Myth #2*.

***Myth #2 - Speed Enforcement Increases Safety.*** In 1995, the Feds gave Connecticut nearly \$750,000 to intensify speed enforcement on 55-mph highways. Over that Memorial Day weekend, scores of extra troopers, airplanes, and unmarked cars armed with radar and laser were dispatched with the stated objective of reducing accidents and fatalities. Compared to the previous Labor Day weekend, speeding tickets were up an impressive 33 percent, seatbelt tickets were up a dramatic 51 percent and DWI (driving while intoxicated) tickets increased 22 percent. Yet accidents on those targeted highways increased a breathtaking 66 percent, proving (again) that there is no correlation between enforcement effort (numbers of tickets) and actual highway safety.

Research shows that if authorities truly want to reduce average speeds, the most effective way is through highly visible police presence. People naturally drive more safely and pay more attention to their speed when the enforcement is easily seen. Conversely, "stealth" enforcement (unmarked and hidden cars, airplanes, instant-on radar) is highly effective at generating tickets and revenue but not at decreasing speeds or accidents.

***Myth #3 - Slower Is Always Safer.*** Despite the oft-repeated mantra that "Speed Kills," Federal and state studies consistently have shown that the drivers most likely to get into accidents in traffic are those traveling significantly below the average speed. Compared to keeping with the prevailing "pace," those driving 10 mph slower are statistically six times as likely--and those 20 mph slower are ten times as likely--to be involved in an accident. They get hit from behind or caught up in collisions caused by faster-moving vehicles suddenly braking and swerving to get around.

Since freeway "pace" is often well above posted limits, drivers are faced with the uncomfortable choice of legal speed or the higher, yet safer, prevailing speed. Actually, the drivers statistically least likely to be involved in accidents--perhaps because they are more alert--are those traveling 5-10 mph above the prevailing speed. Guess who gets the tickets.

***Myth #4 - Use of Radar Detectors Increases Speeds and Accidents.*** Every time someone sets out to prove this popular presumption - and there have been many, many studies by enforcement authorities and others with a vested interest in banning detectors--they end up disproving it. One respected 1988 Yankelovich Clancy Shulman study showed that detector users actually had 23 percent fewer accidents per mile than nonusers.

What do detector users do when their dashboard defenders sound off? They quickly check and (if necessary) adjust their speed and increase their awareness. Scanning for police, they may instead see a dangerous condition or impending accident in time to avoid it. This is why police and (unmanned) "drone" radar senders are often used at accident, construction, and reduced visibility (dust, fog, snow) sites -- because traffic speeds and accidents decrease when detector users slow and pay closer attention, influencing others to do the same.

***Myth #5 - The Federal 55-mph Limit Saved Thousands of Lives.*** Because it was established during the 1973 fuel crisis, people naturally drove less and slower to preserve precious fuel, which caused a brief downward blip in fatalities. Once fuel availability returned to normal, so did driving miles and speeds. And the highway death rate quickly snapped back to its (already downward) trend line.

***Myth #6 - Speed Enforcement is Driven by Safety Concern.*** Though vigorously pursued in the name of safety to assure public and media support, it's been mostly about money for almost three decades. A recent feature in my local paper stated this clearly: "Citations rise to 6-year high," trumpeted the subhead. "The tickets are expected to pump a much-



needed \$1.5 million into the city's general fund." While public safety was the stated reason, no data was offered to show that our streets and highways are any safer as a result.

**Myth #7 - Lower Speed Limits Reduce Average Speeds and Accidents.** Multiple studies have shown that drivers adjust their speeds primarily to road, weather and traffic conditions. Setting limits at the "85th percentile" speed, where 85 percent are at or below (and only about 5 percent are significantly above), always results in maximum compliance and fewest accidents. Posting limits well below this 85th percentile speed (common practice) naturally increases the number of speeders -- and therefore potential ticket revenue -- but does not slow traffic any more than posting speeds well above it makes everyone drive too fast.

Check the NMA's excellent web site ([www.motorists.org](http://www.motorists.org)) for information on this and other motorist issues. They'll show you how and why our speed enforcement system is increasingly corrupt and out of control. They'll tell you to go to court and fight every ticket -- even ones you think you deserve, because you may not deserve the next one -- and they'll show you how to do that effectively.

And if you want to take issue with them (or me) on any of this, do some research and get your facts straight first. Don't believe what the vested-interest authorities, insurance companies (who take enormous advantage through increased premiums for even minor offenses), and the ignorant popular media tell you. Most people have strong emotion and opinions on these issues, but they don't have the facts. If you find yourself disbelieving and disagreeing with solid, research-based facts, you are probably reacting with emotion and opinion alone. Or maybe your job depends on this lucrative speed enforcement business.

**Gary Witzenburg is not an employee of Consumer Guide or Publications International, Ltd. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of Consumer Guide.**

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