Setting of Speed Limits 2024 – Submission

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION CENTRE AOTEAROA

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About the Public Health Communication Centre

The Public Health Communication Centre (PHCC) is an independently funded organisation dedicated to increasing the reach and impact of public health research in Aotearoa New Zealand. The Centre has a range of public health and science communication experts, and the Director is Prof Michael Baker. We are hosted by the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago Wellington.

The PHCC identifies and promotes opportunities to improve public health, equity, and sustainability, and communicates these ideas effectively to the public, media, and decision-makers.

The Public Health Communication Centre strongly supports retaining the lowered speed limits which were put in place in 2020. These decisions were made after extensive consultation with local communities.

We have listed the health impacts taken from evidence laid out in a Briefing[1] we published online on 8 July 2024. This submission summarises the key points.

Increasing speed limits will increase deaths and serious injury

Deaths and serious injuries are much higher at increased speeds, primarily as a result of increased stopping distances. The chances of a pedestrian surviving a crash are around 90% at 30km/h, compared to around 10% at 50km/h.[2]

Analysis of changes in crash rates in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) following reductions in speed limits have found notable decreases in deaths and injuries.[3]

Increasing speed limits will increase environmental pollution

Over 2,000 people die each year in NZ from traffic-related air pollution.[4]

The optimum speed for minimising emissions is 60-80 km/h.[5] 'Aggressive driving' (speeding, rapid acceleration and braking) also increase emissions[6], and urban speed limits of 30km/h result in significantly lower emissions than 50km/h whilst having only a 'small effect on total journey times'.[7]

Traffic-related noise pollution also has a significant negative impact on health.[8]

Increasing speed limits will negatively impact community wellbeing and equity

The impacts of speed on other road users are considerable. Even when deaths and injuries do not occur, concerns about speeds can prevent people from walking and cycling in their neighbourhoods. If more people drive because they don't feel safe, especially with young children, then there is extra traffic on the roads further increasing risk of injuries and deaths, and noise and air pollution. Preventing people from walking and cycling contributes to poor health through reduced physical activity.

Communities with slower traffic have better general health and wellbeing.[9] When asked 'if you could do one thing' to reduce health inequalities, Oxford University Professor Danny Dorling said "Implement 20mph [~30km/h] speed limits where 30mph [~50 km/h] ones have usually been in place".[10] The reasons were that it is cheap, easily done, and in addition to reducing deaths and serious injuries, especially among children, it brings "wider benefits such as less pollution and stronger communities". He added that it would reduce inequalities as "people tend to be at most risk of being hurt or killed by cars in the poorer parts of towns and cities".

This conclusion is likely to be equally important in NZ as we know that rates of injury and death on the roads disproportionately affect Māori, younger people, and those in low-income communities.[11] Research demonstrates that exposure to traffic-related air pollution is worse for people living in lower income areas.[12]

Lowering speed limits on roads is increasingly considered best practice internationally and is backed by a growing evidence base

Many cities overseas are adopting 30km/h urban speed limits. Nearly 30 million people in the UK live in 20mph (30km/h) speed limit areas. There are similar examples across continental Europe, the USA, South America and Australia.

The evidence supporting lowering speeds is increasing. For example, a recently published systematic review examined the impact of city-wide 30 km/h speed limits in 40 cities across Europe, including Brussels, Paris, and Zurich.[13] It found that reductions in speed limits improved road safety by decreasing the likelihood of crash risk and the severity of crashes that do occur:

> "On average, the implementation of 30 km/h speed limits in European cities demonstrated a 23%, 37%, and 38% reduction in road crashes, fatalities, and injuries, respectively. Lower speed limits also yielded environmental benefits, with emissions decreasing on average by 18%, noise pollution levels by 2.5 dB, and fuel consumption by 7%, indicating enhanced fuel efficiency and reduced environmental impact. Encouraging citizens to embrace walking, cycling and utilizing public transit services can further contribute to a safer and environmentally sustainable urban environment."[13]

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