

Governors urge action to curb American addiction to speeding

Governors urge action to curb U.S. speed addiction.

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Noninterstate rural roads are more than twice as deadly when it comes to speed-related crash rates than urban roadways.

WASHINGTON – A comprehensive new report on the perils of speeding suggests that the ever-growing cultural divide between rural and urban America may include shifting views on the wisdom of putting the pedal to the metal.

Many Western and Southern states have been raising the speed limit in recent years, despite data showing that noninterstate rural roads are more than twice as deadly when it comes to speed-related crash rates than urban roadways. But some cities, such as New York and Boston, have been clamping down on speeding by lowering the posted limits or increasing enforcement or penalties.

The Governors Highway Safety Association has seized on that as a sign of hope that now is the time to deal with the American addiction to speed.

“We want to marshal that energy from some of the urban areas and see what we can learn from that and apply that to rural areas,” GHSA Executive Director Jonathan Adkins said. He said the growing effort to transform some cities and suburbs into places that are environmentally sustainable and safer for bicyclists and pedestrians has created a new push for reducing traffic speeds.

But the GHSA's report also suggests it might go unheard. In even-tempered language, the GHSA makes the case that Americans are basically fine with the idea that nearly 10,000 people die every year because to some it's more important to save time than save lives.

Even in Washington, D.C., traffic deaths have risen to the highest level since 2008 despite Mayor Muriel Bowser's commitment to the Vision Zero initiative, which aims to eliminate traffic deaths by 2024. In 2017, 55 percent of all fatal crashes in the District had speed-related causes, a percentage that ranked only behind New Hampshire, where 57 percent of all motor vehicle deaths were related to speeding, the report found.

Still, Adkins said Washington's response, including steeper fines and eliminating right turns on red at dozens of intersections, suggests the city is moving in the right direction.

In contrast, a number of Legislatures have all but waved the checkered flag for lead-footers: 22 states have bumped the maximum speed to 70 mph, while seven have raised the limit to 80 mph. Texas has a stretch of highway that allows people to cruise along at 85 mph, the report said. And that's just the posted limit.

The report, citing federal studies, notes that "most traffic exceeds posted speed limits, and this culture is mutually reinforced between drivers, policymakers, and many transportation stakeholders."

Many people suggested the nation would be freeing its inner speed demon when Congress rescinded the national speed limit in 1995. Combined with a lack of federal grants that fund state efforts to combat speeding — and reduced law enforcement efforts in many states — the problem has become more pervasive.

The GHSA report urges renewed efforts to slow people down, such as educational programs, the wider use of technology (such as traffic cameras and GPS monitoring) and federally funded programs that target excessive speed, including beefed-up law enforcement.