Dangerous Regulations

Report: How state-level restrictions are hindering efforts to address some of Ohio's most deadly streets

OHIO SPEED LIMIT REFORM COALITION

Introduction

Speed is deadly.

Vehicle speed is a primary factor influencing both the likelihood of a crash and the severity of that crash.

Traffic deaths have been rising across the US and in Ohio during the pandemic years and an alarming increase in speeding and reckless driving is the key factor.

In an attempt to tackle a leading cause of untimely death and injury, cities across Ohio have adopted Vision Zero programs. Cleveland, for example, had 73 traffic deaths in 2021, about a 50 percent year-over-year increase. The city has begun using tools like speed humps, bike lanes and other proven safety interventions to try to tackle the problem.

But current state law is tying the hands of local governments in their efforts to improve some of the most dangerous streets. In Ohio, speed limits are governed by state statute, dictated primarily by road type through distant authorities with limited allowance for local context. Though the rules were developed to promote conformity and protect against speed traps — worthwhile considerations — they are unnecessarily prescriptive and are a hindrance to good faith safety efforts, especially in major cities with high pedestrian activity.

Localities that are genuinely endeavoring to reduce traffic deaths need the state to be a partner in better traffic safety, rather than an obstacle.

The Ohio Speed Limit Reform Coalition is working to promote modest, common-sense solutions that respect the need for checks on abuse without hindering increasingly urgent local road safety efforts.

The Problem

Ohio Law defines almost all streets that exceed one mile in length as "through highways," with a standard speed limit of 35 mph. Although there are a few exceptions, including "business districts" and downtown areas, the designation includes many densely populated urban residential streets, where prevailing speeds of 35 mph or higher present a safety risk, especially to vulnerable road users like pedestrians and cyclists.

Municipalities do have the ability lower speed limits on these streets, but only after completion of a speed study that imposes specific criteria. The criteria are established by the Ohio Department of Transportation. That agency is also responsible for approving applications to lower speed limits.

Last year, the Ohio Department of Transportation amended its speed study process, including additional consideration of vulnerable road users. The new guidance also lowered -- from the 85th percentile to the 50th percentile speed -- the threshold for which existing driving speeds should dictate speed limits.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic years, we have seen alarming increases in speeding and reckless driving. Many of Ohio's major cities have committed to "Vision Zero" goals and are trying to implement safety related changes on roads that have been identified as dangerous. However, municipalities are finding that ODOT's revised guidance still requires speeds to be set at dangerously high levels on key corridors.

Worse, statutory speed limits of 35 mph limit safety officials' options for traffic calming interventions. This creates a "chicken and egg" problem wherein streets are dangerous streets because drivers are traveling too fast, but because of the existence of fast-moving traffic, lower speed limits and traffic calming interventions that are appropriate in urban environments are not practicable.

The next few pages contain examples of dangerous streets where state law and ODOT policy have been barriers to local demands:

Problem Streets

No. 01

Jefferson Avenue (Cincinnati)

This six-lane arterial runs right next to the University of Cincinnati and sees heavy pedestrian traffic. It is signed for 35 mph, though drivers frequently exceed it. An 18-year-old University of Cincinnati student was killed by a hit-and-run driver while attempting to cross the road in a crosswalk in September.

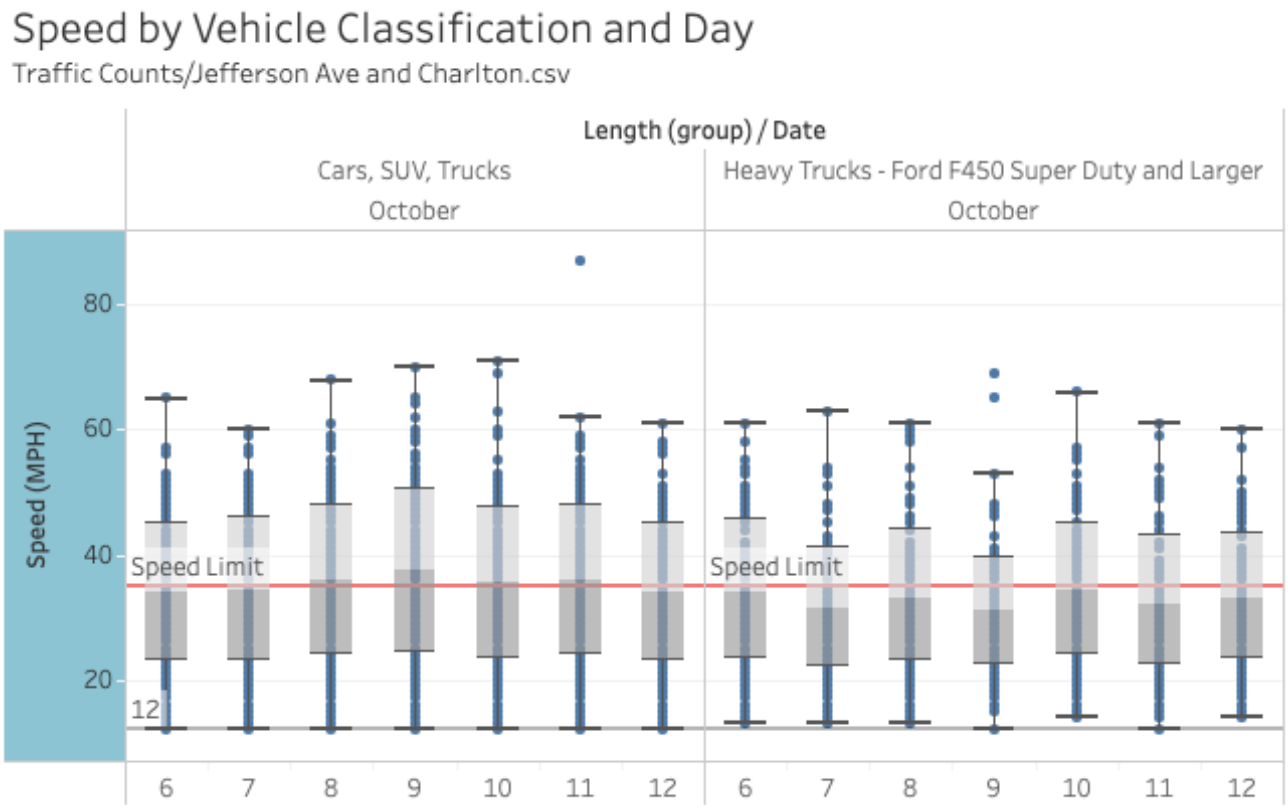
The problem

Although 25 mph would be a safer and more appropriate speed limit for Jefferson, City officials do not have the authority to lower it. According to speed data compiled by the City of Cincinnati and the Devou Good Foundation, the median driver is traveling about 35 mph along Jefferson, meaning it would likely not qualify for a lower speed limit, even under ODOT's revised guidance. As a result, City staff does not support the installation of certain traffic calming measures, like speed hump, an example of the "chicken and egg problem," where street design promotes high speeds, drivers take advantage, and then those speeds become an obstacle to changing the street design to promote slower speeds. (1)

Jefferson Ave. Cont.

Speed data

The Devou Good Foundation, in partnership with the City of Cincinnati, has been collecting speed data on Jefferson using radar devices. Top speeds are above 60 miles per hour -- clearly unsafe for an urban environment with high pedestrian volumes. But the median 50 percentile speed used by ODOT for speed-limit setting is still around 35 miles per hour. A 2020 study by a personal injury law firm found the intersection of Jefferson and Martin Luther King Drive to be one of the most dangerous in the region. (2)



Problem Streets

No. 02

East Whittier Street (Columbus)

This narrow two-lane road runs through densely populated neighborhoods in South Columbus including German Village where there is heavy foot traffic. A number of traffic calming elements are in place to encourage drivers to move slowly, including intersection bumpouts and on-street parking.

The problem

The current speed limit, however, which is established by state law, is 35 miles per hour -- out of sync with the context. A speed study is currently underway, but it's not clear whether current travel speeds will be low enough to warrant lowering the speed limit under Ohio Department of Transportation's new guidance.

Problem Streets

No. 03

Lake Avenue (Cleveland)

Lake Avenue is a two-lane urban arterial street with on-street parking in west Cleveland. Its land use is mostly residential, with a number of high-density apartment buildings. It is also bordered by a large park that attracts significant bike and pedestrian traffic.

The problem

Due to the length of the street (more than one mile) and its inclusion within a municipality, under current state law the prima facie speed limit is 35 miles per hour. This has been a constant complaint of neighborhood residents, who have raised safety issues. Between 2014 and 2016, there were 98 crashes on the corridor, nearly a fifth of which involved injuries. In addition, there were multiple crashes involving pedestrians and cyclists. However, when a speed study was conducted by the firm Euthenics Inc. in 2018, it found that the 85th percentile speed driven by drivers was 36 miles per hour and did not warrant a lower speed limit. Even under the Ohio Department of Transportation's new speed study guidance, allowing the 50th percentile speed to be used, it's not clear a the street would qualify. Median speeds in 2018 were 32-34 miles per hour. (3)

Problem Streets

No. 04

Hamilton Avenue (Cincinnati)

Hamilton Avenue/State Route 127 runs three miles between Northside and College Hill in Cincinnati, on the journey bisecting several small business districts. The speed limit varies throughout the route from 25 to 30 to 35 miles per hour over its length. But drivers maintain high rates and speeds and the street has been the site of fatal collisions.

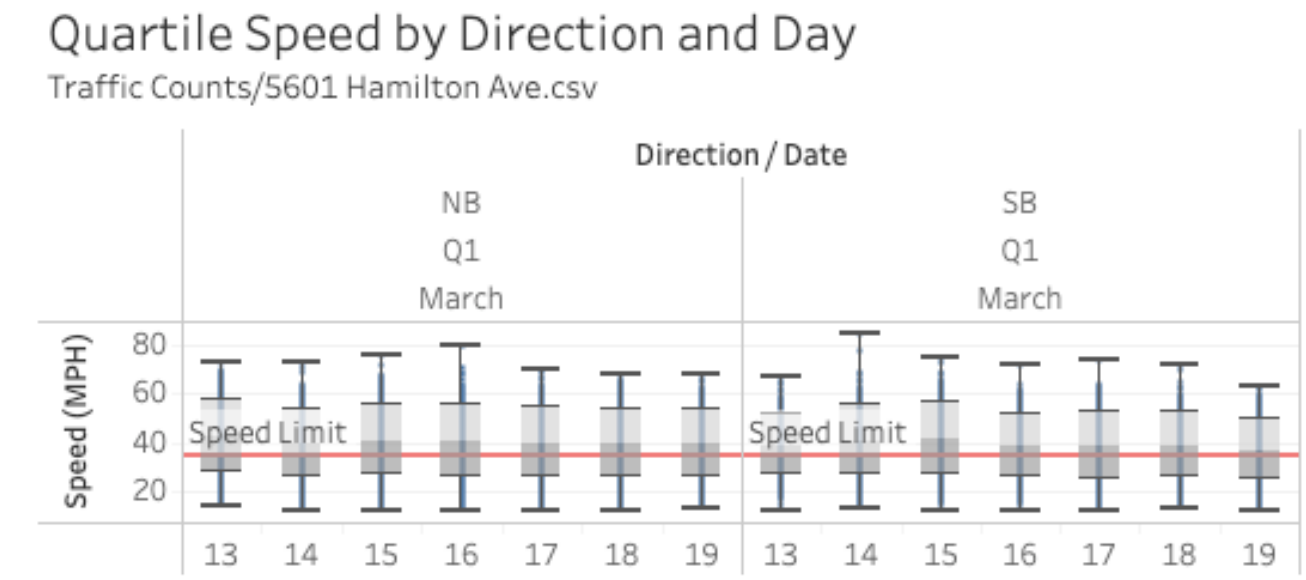
The problem

State law allows speed limits on arterial roads to be set at 25 mph if they run through business districts but not outside. Currently, along the three-mile stretch of Hamilton Avenue, the speed limit cycles between 25, 30 and 35 miles per hour, creating confusion and undermining compliance. Drivers who travel Hamilton Avenue must perceive and adjust to multiple speed limit changes. Bus riders who use the corridor report feeling unsafe on the sidewalks. Devou Good Foundation radars registered a top speed of 85 mph in October. (4) However, it's not clear that Ohio's modified speed study guidance would allow for lower speed limits because the median speed was still around 35 miles per hour.

Hamilton Ave. Cont.

Speed data

High speeds are the primary reason pedestrians using transit and in business directs around Hamilton Avenue don't feel safe. Yet those high speeds themselves are an obstacle to safety treatments. Median speeds in Hamilton exceed the 35 mph speed limit and upper bounds speeds are clearly inappropriate for a corridor with such frequent pedestrian activity.



Problem Streets

No. 05

Westerville Road/ SR 3 Columbus

Westerville Road/SR 3 is a two-lane road that runs through North Columbus and into Westerville. For most of its length, the road lacks sidewalks. It is signed variously at 35 and 45 miles per hour. The road was built to Ohio Department of Transportation design criteria and appears almost rural in its design despite bisecting several urban/suburban neighborhoods.

The problem

In October a four-year-old girl was killed while trick-or-treating on this road. Her mother was also critically injured. In the aftermath, a local resident is quoted by WSYX Fox 28 News as saying “Why won’t Columbus lower and enforce speed limits and implement calming measures? Parents are terrified. This is a horrible, preventable tragedy." (5)

SR3 is listed on both the City of Columbus and the Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission's High Injury Networks. (6)

Our Proposal

Two state policies have been identified as obstacles to improving traffic safety on some of the most dangerous streets in Ohio's major cities. We propose minor changes so that state rules do not hamstring local safety efforts:

Agency	Passage	Proposed change
Ohio Department of Transportation	Lack of flexibility around 50th percentile speed test in speed studies	• Inclusion of documented history of safety problems • Recognition of, accounting for potential "chicken-egg" problem with traffic calming measures
Ohio Legislature	**Prima facie speed limits of 35 mph for "through highways"**	• "Through Highway" category is overlow broad, does not allow for local context (residential environments) • 25 mph is a more appropriate standard speed limit in urban areas.

Who we are

The Ohio Speed Limit Reform Coalition includes advocacy professionals and senior politicians and transportation officials from Ohio's major cities. The group was formed in fall 2022 to respond to the shared concern that state policy is hindering local efforts to address rising traffic deaths, especially in urban environments with high pedestrian activity and to work together toward a solution.

THE DEVOU GOOD FOUNDATION

The coalition includes:

-Matt Butler, Devou Good Foundation

-Jody Robinson, Devou Good Foundation

-Calley Mersmann, Senior Mobility Strategist to Cleveland Mayor Justin Bibb

-Letty Schamp, PE, Director of Transportation and Mobility for the City of Hilliard

-Cleveland City Councilman Charles Slife

-Laruen Cardoni, Mid-Ohio Regional Planning Commission

-Cincinnati City Councilman Mark Jeffreys

-Jacob VanSickle, Executive Director Bike Cleveland

-Laura Estandia, Bike Miami Valley

-Steve Magas, Ohio Bike Federation

-Angie Schmitt, 3MPH Planning and Consulting

-Angelo Trivisanno, Cleveland resident

Citations

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#2. Mitchell, Madeline, "Evanston intersection tops list of most dangerous intersections in Cincinnati, new study states," Cincinnati Enquirer, July 30, 2020. https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2020/07/30/here-list-25-most-dangerous-intersections-cincinnati/5538689002/

#3. Euthenics Inc. Consulting Engineers, "Lake Avenue Speed Zone Study," prepared for the City of Cleveland, January 2018.

#4. Tablau Public, "Traffic Count and Speed Data," Devou Good Foundation, Hamilton Avenue https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/devou.good.project/viz/TrafficCountandSpeedData/TrafficCountsDashboard

#5. Bruner, Bethany, "4-year-old child struck by vehicle, killed while trick-or-treating on Northeast Side," Columbus Dispatch, Nov. 1, 2022. https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2022/11/01/4-year-old-struck-by-truck-killed-while-trick-or-treating-in-columbus/69608935007/

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Contact

Ohio Speed Reform Coalition

angie@3mphplanning.com