SWOV Fact sheet

The relation between speed and crashes

Summary
The faster one drives, the more likely a crash and the higher the risk of severe injury. The exact relation between speed and crashes depends on many factors. The injury severity of the vehicle occupants in a crash, for example, is not only determined by the collision speed but also by the mass difference between the vehicles. With regard to the crash rate, speed has a more prominent role in more complex situations like on urban roads than on less complex roads like motorways. Whatever the case, the effect of speeding measures is determined by absolute driving speeds, road types and speed differences between vehicles.

Background
Speed is one of the basic risk factors in traffic (Wegman & Aarts, 2006). Higher driving speeds lead to higher collision speeds and thus to severer injury. Higher driving speeds also provide less time to process information and to act on it, and the braking distance is longer. Thus the possibility of avoiding a collision is smaller. In short: high driving speeds lead to a higher crash rate, also with a severer outcome. However, not everything is known yet about the exact relation between speed and road safety, and the conditions that influence this relation. This makes it difficult, for example, to calculate the effects of specific speeding measures. This fact sheet summarizes the most recent insights in the relation between speed and road safety (Aarts; 2004; Aarts & Van Schagen, 2006). Other SWOV fact sheets that discuss aspects of the topics speed and speeding are *Speed choice, the effect of man, vehicle, and road*; *Towards credible speed limits*; *Measures for speed management*; *Police enforcement and driving speed*; and *Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA)*.

How important is the role of speed in crashes?
In theory, speed plays a role in every road crash: if everybody was to stand still, there would be no traffic. However, it is very difficult to determine the number of crashes in which too fast a speed was the main cause. In addition to speed, there often are various other factors involved that result in a crash. Speed can contribute to a crash occurring if it is higher than the local speed limit or than the circumstances at that moment allow (e.g. because of rain, fog or large traffic volume). Inappropriate speed is especially difficult to determine objectively. Therefore the police rarely register speed as the crash cause. It is generally assumed that about a third of fatal crashes are (partly) caused by excessive or inappropriate speed (OECD/ECMT, 2006).

What is the relation between speed and crash severity?
The relation between speed and safety rests on two pillars. The first pillar is the relation between collision speed and the *severity* of a crash; the second pillar is the relation between speed and the *risk* of a crash. The higher the collision speed, the more serious the consequences in terms of injury and material damage. This is a law of physics that involves the quantity of kinetic energy that is converted in an instant into e.g. heat and matter distortion. In addition, the human body is physically very vulnerable in comparison with the enormous forces released in a collision. During the past decades, vehicles have become ever better equipped (with crush areas, airbags and seatbelts) to absorb the energy released in a crash, thus protecting the occupants. However, the collision speed still is very important for the crash outcome. At a collision speed of 80 km/h, the possibility that the car occupants are killed is about 20 times greater than at a speed of 30 km/h (IHHS, 1987).

Which road users have the most risk of injury?
Besides speed, the mass of the vehicles involved is important. In collisions between two vehicles of different mass, the occupants of the lighter vehicle are generally considerably worse off than those in the heavier vehicles. The difference in mass determines which vehicle absorbs which part of the released energy. Generally speaking, the energy absorption is inversely proportional to the masses of

the vehicles. Vehicle masses can differ enormously. This is particularly true for lorries and cars, between which the mass difference can easily be a factor of 10. But there are also considerable mass differences between cars, and these are becoming greater (a factor of 3 is by no means an exception). This 'incompatibility' of vehicles is a large and increasing road safety problem.

The incompatibility in collisions between vulnerable road users and practically any motor vehicle type is of a completely different order. There are mass differences from a factor of 10 (light cars) to nearly 700 (lorries of 50 tons). In addition, pedestrians, cyclists, (light-)moped riders and motorcyclists do not have an 'iron cage' around them that can absorb some of the energy released in a collision. Laboratory tests show that in a collision between a car and a pedestrian, the survival rate of the pedestrian decreases enormously as the car speed increases: at a speed of 30 km/h, 'only' 5% of the pedestrians is killed; at 50 km/h this is 45% and at 65 km/h the number is even 85% (ETSC, 1995).

What is the relation between speed and crash rate?

The second pillar of the relation between speed and safety concerns the *risk* of a crash. The faster a car is driven, the higher the risk of being involved in a crash. This is partly due to the longer braking distance and partly to the fact that the human being is limited in its capacity to process information and act on it. It must be noted, however, that the relation between speed and crash rate is much less direct and much more complicated than the relation between speed and crash severity.

What effect does the absolute speed have?

Relatively many studies have examined the relation between absolute speed and the crash rate. Irrespective of the research method used, practically all the studies concluded that the relation between speed and crash rate can best be described as a power function: the crash rate increases *faster* when the speed increases and vice versa (*Figure 1*).

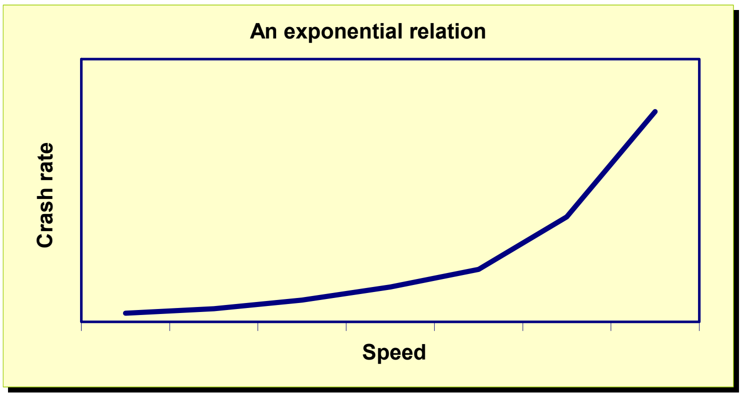

Figure 1. *Diagram showing the power function in the speed-crash probability relation.*

Very well known Swedish studies that are still often quoted in this context are those carried out by Nilsson (1982; 2004). These studies examined the effects on the number of crashes of the increases and decreases of average speeds on a road section due to changes in speed limit.

In Australia much research has been conducted into the effect of the speed of individual vehicles on the crash rate (Kloeden et al., 1997, 2001, 2002). These studies even show an exponential relation between speed and crash rate. Furthermore, Kloeden et al. (1997) compared the crash rates related to speed with those related to alcohol. The study concentrated on urban through roads with a speed limit of 60 km/h. The results showed that a motorist driving 5 km/h faster than this speed limit has double the risk of being involved in an injury crash than a motorist who keeps exactly to the speed limit. Exceeding the speed limit by 10 km/h has a four times higher crash rate and the risk is more than ten times higher at 15 km/h. On the roads studied, the increase of the crash rate due to exceeding the speed limit was about the same as that related with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.5, 0.8, and 1.2 respectively (*Figure 2*). However, for this comparison it must be noted that drink-driving is an almost constant risk factor, whereas speeding often is not constant. Drink-driving therefore has an effect on a longer part of the journey than speeding. Thus, given a certain journey, the risk of a crash is higher when the BAC is too high than when the speed driven (over part of the distance) is too fast.

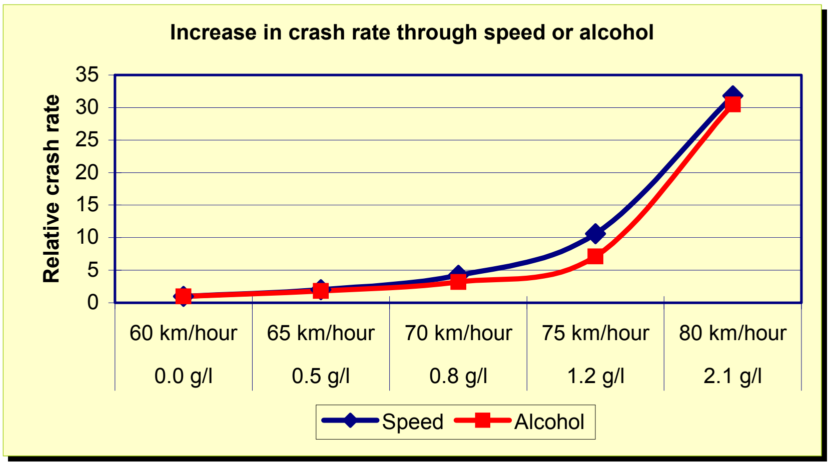

Figure 2. *Crash rates related with various speeds and various BAC levels (Kloeden et al., 1997).*

Is the relation between speed and crash rate the same for all roads?
The fact that the crash rate shows a higher increase as the speed gets faster, suggests that speeding measures may have a greater effect on, for example, motorways than on urban roads. However, this is not the case, because both the height of the crash rate as well as the extent by which the crash rate increases at faster speeds strongly depend on the road type. Roughly speaking, motorways have the lowest crash rate and, as the speed increases, the crash rate for motorways increases less rapidly than that for lower order roads. The reverse is also true: the same drop in speed (in km/h) has a larger safety effect on lower order roads than on higher order roads.

Very probably, these differences are related with the complexity of the road and traffic environment in combination with the human limitations of coping with large quantities of information, especially if little time is available. Rural roads and, to an even larger extent, urban roads, have much more complex traffic environments in comparison with motorways: there are encounters with more different types of road users coming from different directions and therefore with less predicable behaviour. In addition and partly connected with it, the road's design speed also has an influence. On a road with a design speed of 80 km/h, a speed increase from 80 to 90 km/h results in a larger increase in crash rate than the same increase on a road with a design speed of 100 km/h. This is a consequence of 80 km/h roads not being designed for these faster speeds.

Is the relation between speed and crash rate the same for serious and less serious crashes?
An increase or decrease in speed has a greater effect on serious crashes than on light crashes. Based on kinetic laws Nilsson (1982) already calculated this in the early 1980s. The effect on the number of injury crashes can be expressed by the following formula:

$$LO_2 = LO_1\left(\frac{v_2}{v_1}\right)^2$$

with LO_2 being the number of injury crashes after the change in speed, LO_1 being the initial number of injury crashes, v_1 being the average speed before the change, and v_2 being the average speed afterwards. The same formula could be used to describe the effect on the number of crashes with severe injury, but not to the power 2, but to the power 3, and for fatal crashes its effect was to the power 4. The power functions have been validated using more recent data (Nillson, 2004; Elvik, Christensen & Amundsen 2004). They apply to different road types.

Using these formulas, the effect of speed changes has been calculated for different speed limits and for different crash severities (*Table 1*). These percentages give an indication of the expected effects of a change in average speed of 1 km/h for different initial speeds. The real effect on a particular road can, of course, deviate from the outcome, for example due to specific road or traffic features.

Crashes	Initial speed					
	50 km/h	70 km/h	80 km/h	90 km/h	100 km/h	120 km/h
Injury crashes	4.0%	2.9%	2.5%	2.2%	2.0%	1.7%
Severe injury crashes	6.1%	4.3%	3.8%	3.4%	3.0%	2.5%
Fatal crashes	8.2%	5.9%	5.1%	4.5%	4.1%	3.3%

Table 1. *The expected effect of a speed change of 1 km/h on the number of crashes of different severities at different initial speeds (Aarts & Van Schagen, 2006).*

What is the effect of speed differences?
In addition to absolute speeds, the speed differences between vehicles also have an effect on the crash rate. This effect is studied in two ways. The first type of studies are those that compare the crash rates between roads that have a large speed variance (large differences in vehicle speeds during a 24 hour period) and roads that have a small speed variance. These studies mostly conclude that roads with a large speed variance are less safe (Aarts & Van Schagen, 2006). The second type of studies are those that concentrate on the speed differences between the individual vehicles that were involved in a crash and all the other vehicles. The first studies of this type were conducted in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, e.g. Solomon (1964). These studies always found a U-curve: the slower or faster a car drives compared with most of the vehicles on that road, the more the risk of being involved in a crash increased. However, more recent studies that used more modern measuring instruments and used a more accurate research design, reached a different conclusion (Kloeden et al., 2002). They found that vehicles that drove considerably faster than average on that road had a higher crash rate; vehicles that drove slower did not.

Conclusion
The exact relation between crashes and speed depends on a large number of factors. In general however, the relation is very clear and has been shown in a large number of studies: the higher the speed, the greater the probability of a crash. The crash rate is also higher on roads where the speed differences are greater than on roads where they are smaller. The faster people drive, the greater the probability of severer crashes, for both the vehicle that caused the crash and the collision opponent. On a more complex road and its corresponding complex traffic situations the driver thus has to process more information and make decisions more often. On these roads the crash rate increases more than on roads that are less complex with a similar increase in speed. In practice this means that the effects of speed changes are larger on lower order roads than on higher order roads.

To make an estimation of the effects of speeding measures on the crash rate, the following must in any case be taken into account:
– *absolute speed*: the relation between (absolute) speed and crash rate is not a linear, but a power function (average speed for a road section) or an exponential relation (individual vehicle speed);
– *road type*: the absolute crash rate and its increase at faster speeds is higher in complex traffic situations than in less complex situations;
– *speed differences*: greater speed differences result in a higher crash rate; if a measure results in a lower average speed, but simultaneously in greater speed differences, then the ultimate safety effect can be smaller or even the opposite of the effect of only the average speed reduction.

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