

Attitudes to 20mph

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Introduction: attitude-behaviour gap

People know that speed of vehicles is a key issue in road traffic collisions. Studies suggest around 90% of the public cite it as an important issue (Fuller et al., 2008, Musselwhite et al., 2010a.b; 2014). The vast majority of the public support tougher enforcement of speed limits and are in favour of reducing speed limits in certain residential areas, in particular by schools (Higginson, 2005). Yet many people continue to drive their vehicles over the speed limit. Under free-flowing conditions, the proportions of cars not complying with the speed limit were 53% on motorways, 12% on national speed limit (NSL) single carriageways and 56% on 30mph roads (DfT, 2021). In 20mph sites in free flowing conditions, 87% exceeded the speed limit (DfT, 2021).

Social psychological reasons for speeding

So why are there so many people happy to disobey the law when it comes to speeding, even when they themselves believe it to be dangerous. This is an interesting example in psychology of the gap between attitude and behaviour. In some research I led a few years ago, we unpicked this and found a number of reasons why people are happy to speed (see Musselwhite et al., 2010a.b, 2014):

The speed limit is for other, less safe drivers, I won't crash (over confidence, "Othering")

Despite stating speeding is dangerous, only 3% of the British public state that they themselves are dangerous when they speed (Cauzard, 2003; Quimby, 2005). The pattern is far more marked for younger male drivers who are even more likely to believe that their speeding is not related to being more dangerous (Fuller, Bates et al., 2008). This is a typical example of othering. Drivers are here externalising the dangers, citing that it is other drivers AND not themselves that are the main risk on the roads (King and Parker, 2008; RAC, 2007). Speeding is seen as a major problem but for OTHER people, it is important that others comply with the speed limit, but not necessarily for themselves!

Other drivers speed, so I speed (normative influence)

Almost all drivers believe other drivers frequently speed, for example break the speed-limit or go too fast for the conditions (Cauzard, 2003; Fuller, Bates, et al., 2008). This can have an influence on individuals own choice of speeding behaviour; the more likely drivers are to perceive others speeding the more likely they themselves are to speed (Fuller, Bates et al., 2008).

Younger drivers are more likely than older drivers to perceive other drivers as speeding (Yagil, 1998) and those who drive faster are more likely to perceive that other drivers speed (Aberg et al., 1997). Hence, there is a social norm associated with driving at over the speed-limit, one that the more dangerous individuals hold more strongly.

I need to show off to others ("I can handle the beast at speed!") – impression management, identity, status, roles

The presence or absence of other people in or outside the vehicle, real or imagined, influences road user behaviour. Thomas et al. (2007) suggests for younger drivers, while some passengers, such as parents, tend to reduce risky driver behaviour, others, such as peers, might encourage more of it. Young men were more likely to take risks and drive faster than young women on the road, often stating that there is a social expectation that they would take such risks. Some young people felt they 'grew out' of risky driving as they got older with more expensive cars and family responsibilities. In addition, Silcock et al. (1999) suggest that the effect is there all drivers but is most pronounced in younger male drivers who tend to drive faster when they were with friends but slower when there are children or their own parents in the car. Some people in my focus groups noted risky behaviour was sometimes cathartic, helping them to get rid of frustrations. Driving in a risky manner was also said to be an ego boost, making participants feel better about themselves, particularly from those in younger age groups. In addition, one youngster noted how driving fast was fun.

Habit (I just do!)

Respondents quite often talked about driving at a speed similar to other traffic on the roads, rather than picking their own speed or sticking to the speed limit. This normative influence on speed has been well documented in previous research (Fuller et al., 2008; Fylan et al., 2006; Stradling and Campbell, 2003).

I didn't know I was speeding

Some people admit they didn't even notice they were speeding with little feedback from the vehicle or the road itself, either concentrating on other aspects of driving or more often than not thinking about something else altogether.

I am an experienced driver, I know my limits and I feel safe to drive at this speed in this context

It was common for respondents to state that they drove at a speed of their own choice that they still felt was safe – reasons for this included: feeling speed limits were too stringent or were out of date with modern technology of cars and their ability to brake more quickly; speeding when roads were empty; and speeding on motorways, which was often perceived to be of very little risk. The speed limit being too stringent or low as a reason for speeding has been found in previous research (see Fuller et al., 2008a; Holder, unpublished). The notion that speeding is OK when individuals have calculated it as being OK, such as when roads are empty, concurs with a 'calculated risk taker' (Fuller et al., 2008b; Musselwhite, 2006).

I won't get caught (and no shame if I am caught)

People knew locations where speed cameras would be, fixed and mobile and adjusted their speed accordingly. Additional heuristics or rules of thumb maintain such behaviour, with a belief that drivers will not be caught for speeding or that authorities turn a blind eye to speeding in certain areas. There was also a feeling that being caught for speeding was not viewed that badly among society, and a feeling of bad luck for getting caught doing something everyone was doing was often noted.

I need to get where I'm going quickly, or at least feel like I am!

There is a view that driving faster got you places quicker, regardless of the truth of the matter. In urban areas for example drivers who drive faster often end up waiting at a junction or set of traffic lights and do not progress any further than drivers driving at the speed limit. The examination of 12 case studies of widespread implementation of 20mph limits across England for example notes that journey times for drivers since introduction of 20mph speed limits are estimated to have increased by 3% in residential areas and 5% in city centre areas, based on the observed change in median speed. This adds less than half a minute to a two mile trip and less than a minute to a five mile trip. Some drivers even acknowledge this disconnect, but then cited the perception of mobility as important, a feeling of not being held up and being able to choose what speed to go as making them feel less stressed and feeling like progress was being made.

There are two additional interesting attitudes about driving in 20mph zones found in research I supported by Toy et al. (2015):

Difficulty of sticking to the limit

Some drivers felt it would be really challenging to stay at such a slow speed, citing issues with car engine speed at that vehicle speed being too low or having to use a lower gear, with the perception of causing more pollution and using more fuel. People also felt pressure from other people behind would mean they would find it hard to stick to the speed limit.

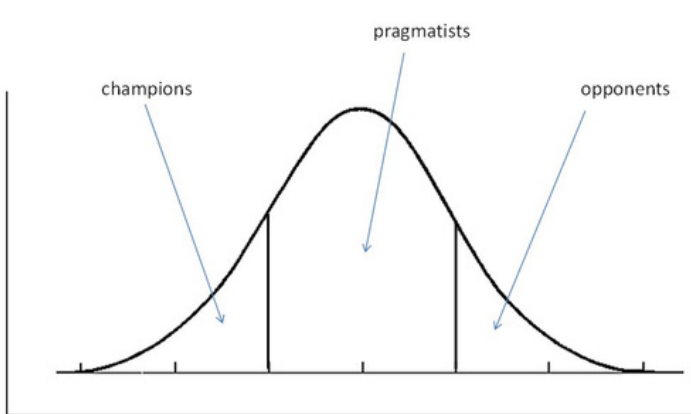
Lack of attention

A version of what is known as risk compensation theory gets discussed by some drivers. They feel that drivers will become unfocussed on the road travelling at such low speeds, leading them to becoming distracted, which would possibly add to the danger.

Diffusion of innovation and 20mph

Interestingly, Toy et al (2015) used Rogers (1962) Diffusion of Innovation model to explain different attitudes found among the participants. Figure 1 offers a simplified version of this model, with three groups who approach 20mph differently, champions, pragmatists and opponents.

Figure 1: Diffusion of innovation curve applied to attitudes



Champions worked had to deliberately drive at 20mph regardless of others around them even if tailgated or flashed by other vehicles. In contrast, ‘pragmatists’ often discussed social norms, were more aware of others behaviour and were influenced by it, feeling the pressure to speed up. Interestingly, many of this group had little awareness of speed limits in general, driving much more to the conditions or as others were around them. The final group, ‘opponents’ were characterised by libertarian views with respect to speeding and tended to be highly against them. This tended to be reflected by setting their own speed limits according to conditions.

The champions, pragmatists and opponents could be tentatively characterised as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Different types of speeder and background characteristics (after Toy et al., 2015)

Type of participant	Descriptor	Attitude to 20mph
Non-car owners, utility cyclisits, sustainable transport professionals	Early adopters	Champions
Parents of young children, middle aged drivers, retired drivers	Mainstream middle	Pragmatists
High mileage commuters, young drivers	Late adopters	Opponents

Different Hats

There are differences depending on the “hat” being worn. Evidence from 12 20mph limit schemes in a report by Atkins (2018) suggest highest level of post implementation support amongst cyclists (81%), residents (75%), and non-resident drivers (66%); but less support amongst residents in neighbouring 30mph areas (44%) and opposition from motorcyclists (29% supportive, 47% unsupportive).

So where next? How do we help people comply with 20mph?

So, what do we need to do to reduce speeding behaviour? The lack of connection between attitude and behaviour suggests changing attitudes alone will have limited consequences. The othering of the dangers of speed is a huge issue and is not helped by language used by papers during road traffic collisions, that take the blame away from individuals, suggesting “accidents” are caused by “cars” rather than collisions being caused by drivers or better still by people. See for example the excellent report [Road Reporting Guidelines from Lara Laker at the University of Westminster](#).

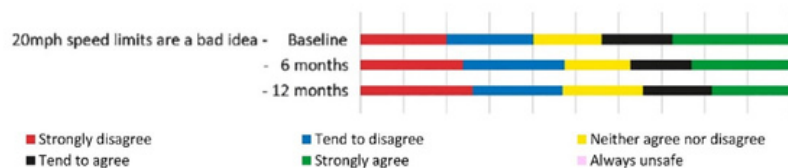
It boils down to two options:

(1) Bring the public along with the decision making, explain the link between attitudes and behaviour, the disconnect between yourself and others, between driver and resident, allay fears about increase to journey times and increases in pollution and gradually introduce 20mph speed limits, possibly using demonstrators to show 20mph areas working well. Taking the diffusion of innovation model, Toy et al (2015) suggest Champions respond well to in depth information on the benefits of 20mph limits, but pragmatists need to know 20mph limits is normal, is supported and complied by the majority of other drivers. Champions will respond well to campaigning organisations, but evangelical campaigners may be off-putting for risk averse mainstream audiences.

Or alternatively:

(2) Introduce 20mph speed limits anyway and build support afterwards. There is increasing evidence that you could put the intervention in first and that'll change attitudes. This has been shown to be the case in Edinburgh and in other areas following implementation, where people's attitudes changed to be more positive after 20mph was put in place. In Edinburgh, people strongly agreeing or tending to agree with the statement “20mph speed limits are a bad idea” changed from a baseline of 45% to 35% a year after implementation (Williams et al., 2022). Similarly, in the Atkins (2012) report across 12 locations, net support (% saying ‘good idea’ - % saying ‘bad idea’) amongst residents increased significantly after the implementation of the schemes (from +58% to +63%) and % saying 20mph limits were a ‘good idea’ increased from 71% to 75%. There is little call for the limit to be changed back to 30mph (12% support amongst residents and 21% amongst non-resident drivers). So, maybe, perhaps lets go full steam ahead, at least at 20mph, and just do it!

Figure 2: % attitudes to 20mph limits before and after implementation (after Williams et al., 2022)



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