

Research supports reduced-speed initiative

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Posted: 4:00 AM CDT Monday, Apr. 12, 2021

Last Modified: 9:51 AM CDT Monday, Apr. 12, 2021



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Support is growing for reduced speed limits on residential streets.

OPINION

Over the last 10 years, six million vehicles have been added to Canadian roads, an increase of almost 20 per cent. Since the 1990s, the average vehicle horsepower has almost doubled, average vehicle weight has increased by 26 per cent, cars are 17 per cent larger and 80 per cent of vehicles sold in Canada today are trucks and SUVs.

In Manitoba, more vehicles and larger, faster vehicles has led to a 50 per cent increase in collisions resulting in injury during the past decade. On Winnipeg streets in 2019, the last available statistics, every second day a pedestrian or cyclist was struck and injured by a

driver seriously enough to be reported. Every third day a pedestrian or cyclist was sent to hospital, and almost once a month one was killed.

Across the country, nearly one out of every five people killed or seriously injured in vehicle collisions is not in a vehicle.

All these statistics are inspiring a wave of change across Canada, as cities are one by one lowering speed limits on residential streets to make neighbourhoods safer for all road users, and more comfortable for pedestrians and cyclists.

Montreal led the way in 2019 by making sweeping speed-limit changes across the city. Main streets were reduced from 50 km/h to 40 km/h and all residential streets were changed to 30 km/h. Edmonton and Calgary, famous for their car culture, followed suit and reduced residential speed limits to 40 km/h. Quebec City recently announced it will match Montreal and go to 30 km/h on most residential streets.

Lowering speed limits to improve road safety is simple physics. The energy transferred in a collision increases with both mass and velocity — bigger vehicles moving faster cause more damage. In general, if a pedestrian is struck by a car travelling at 50 km/h, there is a 50/50 chance of survival, but when speeds are reduced to 30 km/h, almost all pedestrians survive and 30 per cent will not even suffer an injury, making that speed a magic number for advocates.

Slower speeds also reduce stopping distances, from 28 metres at 50 km/h to 20 metres at 40 km/h and 13 metres at 30 km/h, which makes roads safer by reducing the likelihood of collisions. The City of Calgary predicts that by reducing residential speed limits to 40 km/h, as many as 450 vehicle collisions will be avoided each year.

Research in several cities has proven that the science has real-world effects. A study in Toronto showed that between 2013 and 2018, lowering posted residential speed limits from 40 km/h to 30 km/h reduced pedestrian collisions by 28 per cent and severe injuries fell by two-thirds. In Edmonton, implementing 30 km/h school zones has reduced severe pedestrian collisions by almost half. A 20-year study in the U.K. demonstrated that 30 km/h zones were associated with a 42 per cent decrease in road casualties.

Travelling 50 km/h protected by a 2,000-kilogram metal box may not feel fast, but for a pedestrian or cyclist, sharing the road with large, fast-moving vehicles can be unnerving;

so much so that it's a significant deterrent to active transportation for many people. Slower residential street traffic not only makes neighbourhoods safer; it also makes them comfortable and livable, inviting more people to engage in walking and biking.

In response to mounting pressure for change in Winnipeg, Coun. Jeff Browaty recently commissioned a public survey to ask people if they want to drive slower. Not surprisingly, more than half of respondents said no. Coun. Browaty has been using the results as proof that Winnipeggers are opposed to this change.

Digging beyond the headlines, however, those who support safer streets might see the results as a victory. Certainly, they provide reason for optimism. Even with the poll offering little context or background, 44 per cent of respondents supported reducing speed limits and only one-third were strongly opposed. In mature neighbourhoods where people walk and bike far more than they do in the outer suburbs, support was about twice as high.

Without context, people hear reduced residential speed limits, especially 30 km/h, and picture themselves crawling around the city at a snail's pace. In response to this misconception, Edmonton launched a successful public engagement process to outline the impacts. The city even created an app that allows people to input their destination and see the travel time difference with the new speed limits.

In most cases trips were minimally affected because vehicle trips generally include only short distances on residential streets (narrow streets with houses on each side) before a larger route is found.

Consider that in Winnipeg, 25,000 vehicles per day are driven down Grant Avenue, and it has the same speed limit as the cul-de-sac your kids play street hockey on. Portage Avenue downtown is eight lanes wide and has the same speed limit as the two-lane street you back onto when pulling out of your garage. Presented with context, it seems illogical not to change the speed limits.

Public-safety policy is not a popularity contest, and should be based on data, engineering and science, but Coun. Browaty's recent poll shows there is a significant base of support for calmer streets. We take pride in our city of great neighbourhoods; by using this new polling information as a springboard to public consultation that broadens support even further, we can follow the lead of other cities and reduce residential speed limits to make those great neighbourhoods even better.

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