
20-MPH Zones



We have covered the merits of wide-area 20 mph schemes in past newsletters, but proponents continue to promote this idea using spurious arguments. They claim improved road safety but the facts actually show otherwise.

Eric Brigstock recently presented his findings on their effectiveness to an ABD meeting, and also gave a report on his presentation to a conference on the subject.

This is some of what he had to say:

From the second year report on the Portsmouth scheme, the Killed and Seriously Injured (KSI) figure rose from 19 before to 20 after implementation (this was despite there being a national reduction of 12% in the same period). There was also a 38% increase in pedestrian KSIs and an 11% increase in injured cyclists. The report says “*casualty benefits greater than the national trend have not been demonstrated*”. As Mr Brigstock pointed out, these are “weasel words” because the benefits were actually lower than the national trend. The campaign “20s Plenty” do of course continue to promote Portsmouth as a success based on overall casualty figures, when the data shows that the improvement is worse than the national trend (even more so when corrected for traffic volume).

In Bristol on another scheme, there was a net increase in overall casualties. In Oxford, where £250,000 was spent on a scheme in 2009, the KSI figures rose from 61 in 2008 to 71 in 2009 and 72 in 2010. Warrington reported a 66% increase in serious injuries and a 48% increase in minor injuries after the introduction of a 20-mph “pilot” scheme.

Although this data is limited in size, there is a consistent theme that there is no demonstrable benefit from simply putting up 20-mph signs, with no examples where there is a clear advantage.

Mr Brigstock argues that unfortunately 20-mph zones make roads appear safer when they are not. So pedestrians take less care when crossing the road.

In addition, slower moving vehicles are quieter and less easy to notice (human visual systems pick out fast moving objects more quickly) and driver’s attention drifts when they are driving slowly.

(Editor: as with most pet road safety ideas of many enthusiasts – speed humps, speed cameras, etc. – there is little attempt to collect scientifically sound evidence of the benefit of such ideas. No proper controlled, “double-blind” trials are undertaken. The enthusiasts rely on the strength of their rhetoric and the use of selective data to make their case. Don’t be fooled by these methods but look at the facts. And remember that all road safety schemes should be cost justified because if there are better things to spend the money on, then that is where the limited funds should be spent).

Islington and Camden (the Worst!)

Following the publication of accident statistics by the Department for Transport, the Institute of Advanced Motorists (IAM) published an analysis of those local authority areas with the largest increases in KSIs between 2010 and 2011. Portsmouth was in the top two.

But also of interest was that Islington and Camden in London also had some of the worst figures of KSIs per vehicle mile travelled. Those boroughs do of course have more speed humps than many other London boroughs and lots of 20 mph zones. Islington overtook Camden to have the highest rate of KSIs per vehicle mile of all the London boroughs, after KSIs rose from 81 to 100.

R.W.Lawson www.freedomfordrivers.org August 2012