



Boston lags on tickets to enforce speed limit



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

A speed limit sign on Old Colony Avenue in Boston.

By [Milton J. Valencia](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#)

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Less than two years after Boston lowered its speed limit to 25 miles an hour, a spate of tragic accidents has city officials calling for laws that would require drivers to go even slower.

But among various efforts to curb speeding, one particular strategy has been largely missing in city neighborhoods: the issuance of speeding tickets, according to a Globe review. State Registry of Motor Vehicle records show that Boston police hand out far fewer tickets than their counterparts in other cities across the state and country.

In a city of nearly 700,000 residents, Boston police last year issued roughly 20,300 moving violations, or roughly 3 for every 100 residents. That's about half of what is handed out by police in Brookline, Chelsea, or Somerville, and a quarter of the 12.3 violations per 100 city residents issued last year in New York City.

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Boston police and transportation officers say they use other measures to deter speeders, such as signage and radar feedback machines, arguing those can be as effective as citations. But the paucity of tickets in recent years and continued resident complaints of unsafe driving have some community advocates and city councilors calling for more effective enforcement of the laws already on the books.

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“You could reduce the speed limit to 2 miles per hour, but if there’s no enforcement, people can keep speeding and running red lights,” said Steve Jonas, a Beacon Hill resident, who has called on the mayor and city councilors to consider other enforcement measures, such as speed cameras.

“I would like to not get killed crossing the streets of Boston,” he told city officials in a recent letter.

The inconsistency in ticketing is especially vivid in South Boston, where a 3-year-old was fatally struck

in July by a van at an L Street intersection that [residents had identified as a problem area.](#)



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Speed signs posted on L Street South Boston.

Police handed out just five violations for speeding in that area — where the speed limit is 25 miles per hour — during 2017, and just a dozen through the first half of this year. But that number skyrocketed to 155 violations for the three months after the accident, following community outrage that such policing had not been done before.

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Boston Police Sergeant Detective John Boyle said that the department directs patrols to areas where enhanced enforcement is urgently needed, as it was on L Street. But, he said, officers are also in regular communication with residents to identify problem areas throughout the city and will deploy appropriate tactics, whether it be more patrols or feedback boards that notify drivers of their speeds. Sometimes it

can be a warning without a ticket, he said.

“We deploy traffic enforcement where it’s needed, we track statistics, data on crashes, and community complaints,” he said. “If there’s a need, we deploy officers on patrols.”

The July accident and the community outrage that followed led City Councilor Ed Flynn, who represents South Boston, [to propose lowering the limit again, to 20 miles per hour](#). That effort would need state approval, though some councilors have proposed lowering the limit only in certain neighborhoods, which the city can do on its own.

“I don’t see why you need to be going that fast in a city neighborhood,” Flynn said.

The concern over speeding is playing out as officials explore ways to carry out a Vision Zero 2030 plan to eliminate fatal and serious traffic crashes by the end of the next decade. That included the initial effort to lower the speed limit two years ago from 30 to 25 miles per hour.

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The city has also instituted a Neighborhood Slow Streets initiative in areas where speeding has been a concern, which includes “calming measures” such as more “slow” signage, new lighting, extended curbs at intersections, speed bumps, and radar feedback machines that record speeds and display them on a screen. The hope is that drivers self-enforce their speed.



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A speed bump on E Sixth Street in South Boston.

Gina Fiandaca, commissioner of the Transportation Department, said in an interview that traffic enforcement is just one component of the Vision 2030 plan, which includes educating drivers about safety hazards, such as distracted driving, and reengineering roadways with other types of calming measures.

“Certainly, enforcement is a key component of improving roadway safety,” she said, though she added, “It’s also engineering and education . . . one without the other two so closely aligned will only get you so far.”

Some city councilors said it is unwise to just target certain areas after a tragedy, rather than addressing the problem on a citywide basis.

“The whole approach the region has in street safety right now is very reactive, in a way that we are reminded every day of the seriousness and the consequences of delay,” Councilor Michelle Wu said during a council committee hearing in November — the same week that [one pedestrian was killed in West Roxbury](#), another was [seriously injured in Roxbury](#), and a [bicyclist was killed near the Museum of Science](#) in Cambridge.

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Stakes at an intersection on L street intend to keep cars from parking too close to sidewalks.

After Boston lowered its speed limit in January 2017 to 25 miles per hour, the level of enforcement actually went down.

For the last six months of 2016, a Globe review showed, police officers handed out roughly 60 violations a month in areas designated as 30 miles-per-hour zones, the standard maximum before the change went into effect. In zones that dropped to 25 miles per hour, that average dropped in 2017 to 43 violations per month.

The average in those 25 miles-per-hour zones bounced back to 69 violations a month from January 2018 through September, the most recent month with complete data available. But that increase was generated largely by the boost in tickets in South Boston.

Stacy Thompson, executive director of the LiveableStreets Alliance, a safe transportation advocacy group, said tickets have been shown to have minimal deterrence on speeding.

Thompson also argued that digital feedback signs don't always work, pointing to the signs that were used after the May reopening of the Longfellow Bridge that showed drivers were speeding at times in excess of 65 miles per hour in a 25 miles-per-hour zone. The speeding continued even after State Police

handed out hundreds of tickets.

Thompson said Boston should explore technology such as speed cameras. In 2017 in Seattle, which uses speed cameras, [authorities issued more than 67,000 violations for speeding through school crosswalks alone](#) — three times the number of total violations issued in Boston.

Flynn said he would be open to a discussion about speed cameras, though he noted that effort would have to be led at the state level. Past attempts to install cameras to record red light violations have failed.

Flynn said, though, that the discussion should include all measures of enforcement, including handing out tickets.

“You have to have both, a reduction of the speed limit and strict enforcement of speeding regulations,” he said. “Enforcement has to be a part of it.”

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