

## What are the legal speed limits?

### Iowa Code, Section 321.285

Iowa's speed regulations are based on the same basic speed law that is used in all 50 states: "Any person driving a motor vehicle on a highway shall drive the same at a careful and prudent speed not greater than nor less than is reasonable and proper, having due regard to the traffic, surface, and width of the highway and of any other conditions then existing, and no person shall drive any vehicle upon a highway at a speed greater than will permit the person to bring it to a stop within the assured clear distance ahead, such driver having the right to assume, however, that all persons using said highway will observe the law."

Statutory limits are based on the concept that uniform categories of highways can be traveled safely at certain preset maximum speeds under ideal conditions. Whether the speed limit is posted or unposted, drivers should reduce their speed below these values in poor weather, heavy traffic, and under other potentially hazardous conditions.

These are the most common statutory speeds:

- 20 mph in business districts
- 25 mph in residential and school districts
- 45 mph in suburban districts
- 55 mph on rural highways
- 65 mph on selected multilane highways
- 70 mph on rural interstate highways

Whenever these statutory speed limits are not the appropriate speed limit for a specific section of a highway, the Iowa DOT is responsible for posting of other regulatory speed limits. (See Iowa Code, section 321.290)

## How does the Iowa DOT determine the regulatory speed limit?

The Iowa DOT sets regulatory speed limits on state and federal highways based on a thorough engineering and traffic investigation.

These factors are considered:

- road type and surface (curve, hill, etc.);
- location and type of access points (intersections, entrances, etc.);
- existing traffic control devices (signs, signals, etc.);
- crash history;
- traffic volume;
- sight distances;
- pedestrian activity; and
- results of a field review and speed study.

The most important part of the traffic investigation is the speed study. When choosing a speed, drivers take many roadway environment factors into consideration. Therefore, the speed that the majority of people consider prudent is an important value. Data is collected using a laser speed gun at selected locations on the roadway under ideal driving conditions. A technical analysis is done on the results to determine the 85th percentile. This is the value indicating the speed which most (85%) drivers are traveling at or below. Experience has shown that a posted speed limit near this value is the maximum safe and reasonable speed. Studies have shown that traveling much faster or slower than this value can increase your chance of being in a crash.

Engineering judgment is an important tool. The traffic investigator must use knowledge of nationally accepted engineering and safety principles, combined with experience, to assign the safe speed.

## What are the types of speed signs?



### Regulatory Speed Limit Sign

This black and white sign shows the maximum speed that a motorist may travel under ideal conditions. It must be authorized by the Iowa DOT for state and federal highways.



### Advisory Speed Sign

This black and yellow speed sign is used to advise motorists of a comfortable speed to navigate certain situations. It is used with a warning sign. For instance, when traveling on a winding road, the curve warning sign may be used with an advisory speed sign.



### Advisory Speed Sign - Construction

Advisory speed limits are also used to identify safe speeds for specific conditions within a work zone. These black and orange signs are always used with warning signs.



## What are special types of speed zones?



### School Zones

This regulatory speed limit is in effect during a specific time before and after school. The school plate is black and yellow-green, and the other signs are black and white. A 10 mph reduction is typical for school zones with a minimum of 25 mph.



### Work Zones

Work zone speed limits are short-term regulatory speed limits that may be established for the safety of both workers and motorists due to traffic in adjacent lanes. These speed limits range from 25 mph to 55 mph

**DOUBLE FINES will be imposed for violating any regulatory speed limits in work zones.**

# SPEED LIMIT Q&A

## **Will lowering the speed limit reduce speeds?**

Unlikely. Studies show that there is little change in the speed pattern after the posting of a speed limit. The driver is much more influenced by the roadway environment.

## **Will lowering the speed limit reduce crash frequency?**

Again, unlikely. Although lowering the speed limit is often seen as a solution to preventing crashes, this is not the case. Crashes are most often the result of driver inattention and driver error. However, if a posted speed limit is unrealistically low, it creates a greater speed variance (i.e. some drivers follow the speed limit, while most drive at a higher speed that seems reasonable to them). This speed variance can lead to tailgating, unsafe passing, and ultimately to more crashes.

## **Why do we even have speed limits?**

A uniform speed of vehicles in a traffic flow results in the safest operation. The posted speed limits can keep the traffic flowing smoothly, provided the majority of drivers find the speed limits reasonable. To best do this, the limits must be consistently set throughout the state.

Reasonable speed limits also give the motorist an idea of a safe speed to drive in an unfamiliar location.

Reasonable speed limits are used by police officials to identify excessive speeds and curb unsafe behavior.

## **Who do I contact?**

If you believe that there is a safety concern or an inappropriate speed limit posted, the person to contact depends on who is responsible for maintaining the roadway.

### **• State and federal highways**

The state and federal highway system includes:

- Interstate highways
- U.S. highways
- Iowa state highways

For regulatory and advisory speed limits on the state and federal highway system, you may contact the Iowa DOT district office nearest you.

- District 1 – Ames: 800-899-0623
- District 2 – Mason City: 800-477-4368
- District 3 – Sioux City: 800-284-4368
- District 4 – Atlantic: 800-289-4368
- District 5 – Fairfield: 800-766-4368
- District 6 – Cedar Rapids: 800-866-4368

### **• City streets**

For regulatory and advisory speed limits on these roads, contact the appropriate city office.

### **• County roads**

For regulatory and advisory speed limits on these roads, contact the appropriate county engineer's office.

The phone numbers to call for city or county offices are commonly found in the phone book under the government listings section.

Remember to always use good judgment and drive at a safe and reasonable speed for the existing conditions. This is every driver's responsibility.



## **Speed Limit Questions?**

**Here's Your Answer.**

For more information contact:



**Iowa Department  
of Transportation**  
Office of Traffic and Safety  
800 Lincoln Way  
Ames, IA 50010  
515-239-1557



**Iowa Department  
of Transportation**  
Office of Traffic and Safety