

IOWA

Transportation Research and
Injury Prevention Safety Lab

TRIPS Lab | Policy Brief
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CROSSWALKS IN IOWA

This policy brief addresses the lack of protections in Iowa State Code for people using crosswalks. Drivers are not required to stop or yield to bicyclists riding in crosswalks in Iowa. A driver who strikes and kills or injures a bicyclist at trail-roadway crossing would likely not face any legal repercussions. Iowa could take a simple and straightforward approach to legally protect all crosswalk users by changing the term *pedestrian* to *person* in the State Traffic Code.

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WHO HAS LEGAL PROTECTIONS IN IOWA CROSSWALKS? NOT BIKES.

KEY PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- Iowa State Code (321.327) indicates that vehicles must yield the right of way to pedestrians (defined as “any person afoot”) crossing the roadway in crosswalks (unmarked and marked). As such, drivers of motor vehicles are not required to yield to bicyclists or other vulnerable road users (VRUs) in crosswalks.
- Among the 19 Iowa communities with the most VRU-related crashes in crosswalks from 2018-2023, only 4 have city-level ordinances protecting bicyclists.
- Protections for individuals in wheelchairs are often unclear in municipal and state traffic codes and may be left up to interpretations within the judicial system.

What is a “Vulnerable Road User”?

23 U.S.C. 148(a)(15) defines a vulnerable road user (VRU) as a non-motorist, such as a pedestrian, bicyclist, or other cyclist, excluding motorcyclist. This definition also includes persons on motorized or non-motorized personal conveyances such as wheelchairs, skateboards, scooters, segways, and similar devices. Injured persons and highway workers on foot in a work zone are also included.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

Drivers may not face any legal repercussions when they kill or injure someone who is not on foot when using a crosswalk, leading to continued traffic violence and no justice or compensation for victims or their families. Everyone is a VRU at some point, many people use crosswalks on a daily basis. 42,700 households in Iowa (1 in 17) do not have a motor vehicle, leaning more heavily on sidewalks, multi-use paths, and the associated roadway crossings as the only safe infrastructure connecting them with schools, jobs, parks, and more. Changes to state code language can enhance safety and equity for all Iowans. Dr. Cara Hamann, Associate Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Iowa, further highlights the real-world implications in her recent [op-ed](#) published in the Des Moines Register, USA Today, and several other media outlets.

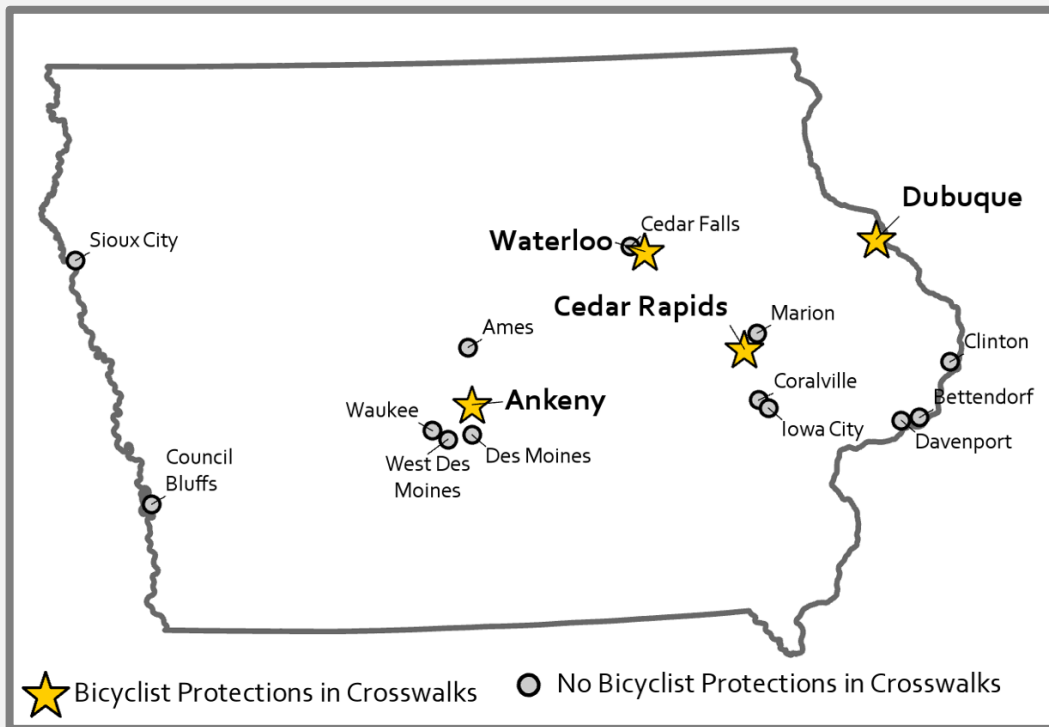


Scan this QR code to
link to the op-ed.

CROSSWALK LAWS IN IOWA

There are resounding gaps in Iowa’s traffic code regarding crosswalks. Iowa traffic code states that “vehicles must yield the right-of-way to pedestrians crossing the roadway in crosswalks (unmarked and marked)”. The Iowa code defines pedestrian as “any person afoot”. This definition leaves many individuals unprotected including bicyclists, children in strollers, skateboards, scooters, and other personal conveyance devices. Although municipalities adopt their own local traffic codes, they often rely heavily on guidance from the state.

There were 885 crashes in Iowa involving vulnerable road users (bicycles, tricycles, unicycles, and pedal cars), wheelchairs, and other non-motorists in crosswalks from 2018-2023. There are 19 cities in Iowa that had 15 or more VRU crashes in crosswalks within this timeline: Ames, Ankeny, Bettendorf, Cedar Falls, Cedar Rapids, Clinton, Coralville, Council Bluffs, Davenport, Des Moines, Dubuque, Fort Dodge, Iowa City, Marion, Mason City, Sioux City, Waterloo, Waukee, West Des Moines.



Among the 19 cities in the analysis, only **4** (21%) protect bicyclists in crosswalks within their municipal traffic ordinances:

Ankeny
Cedar Rapids
Dubuque
Waterloo

Definitions of pedestrian vary widely. Most states and municipalities define pedestrian as a person afoot, but some explicitly include wheelchairs or bicyclists. Of the 19 cities analyzed, Ames was the only city to include persons with assistive devices (e.g., wheelchairs) in their definition.

Most state and municipal traffic codes have a bicycle section, but the bicyclist rights and duties may also be found in the motor vehicle section, pedestrian section, or a section of miscellaneous rules addressing toy vehicles. The lack of consistency in the traffic code creates a barrier for the general public in accessing and understanding this essential information.

In Iowa code, strollers are not defined or referenced at all, leaving interpretations solely up to the judicial system in the event of a crash. Electric personal delivery devices, electric-powered scooters, skateboards, and other similar devices are also undefined. The inconsistencies presented leave VRUs unprotected by the law and may perpetuate dangerous driving habits.

What can we do about this gap in Iowa's traffic code? If Iowa changed the word pedestrian to person in the state crosswalk code, this could provide legal protections to all crosswalk users.

CROSSWALK LAWS IN OTHER STATES

Iowa is not alone. Traffic codes related to VRUs vary widely by state in their content, complexity, and availability. What all 50 states and the District of Columbia have in common is that vehicles must yield to pedestrians legally using a controlled or uncontrolled crosswalk; however, exemptions often exist. Five of Iowa’s 6 neighboring states (Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) include language protecting bicyclists, while other VRUs are protected to varying degrees.

Among these neighbors, Wisconsin provides the most comprehensive protections, simplified into just two sections:

1. **Pedestrian definition:** “Any person afoot or any person in a wheelchair, either manually or mechanically propelled, or other low-powered, mechanically propelled vehicle designed specifically for use by a physically disabled person” (Wis. Stat. 340.01.43).
2. **Duties of a driver approaching a crosswalk:** “the operator of a vehicle shall yield the right-of-way to a pedestrian or personal delivery device, or to a person who is riding a bicycle, electric scooter, or electric personal assistive mobility device in a manner which is consistent with the safe use of the crosswalk by pedestrians” (Wis. Stat. 346.24, 346.25).

Wisconsin’s protections for bicycles are further reinforced in case law, which establishes that bicyclists using a crosswalk in a slow and controlled manner are extended the rights and duties of pedestrians under the same circumstances.¹ Although relatively concise and comprehensive, these provisions still leave potential gaps in protections for human-powered conveyances such as skateboards, roller skates, and scooters, often called “toy vehicles”.

WHO HAS THE RIGHT-OF-WAY?

When approaching a crosswalk, who are drivers required to yield to? An analysis of traffic code across all 50 states and the District of Columbia found:

- **20 states** protect most VRUs, including bicyclists
- **16 states** protect most VRUs, excluding bicyclists
- **3 states** protect people on foot and bicyclists
- **12 states** only protect people on foot (including Iowa)

