

# IOWA

Injury Prevention Research Center

TRIPS Lab

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## Improving Child Passenger Safety on Iowa Roads

Although most Iowans understand the importance of restraining their children in motor vehicles using child car seats, booster seats, and seat belts, there is still work to do.

- Over 23% of Iowa children under six years old are not properly restrained in a vehicle according to state law.<sup>1</sup>
- Children in rural Iowa communities are more likely to be unrestrained or improperly restrained in motor vehicles.<sup>2</sup>
- More Iowa children were completely unrestrained or improperly restrained according to state law in 2023 compared to the prior five years.<sup>1</sup>

Iowa's outdated law protecting child passengers in motor vehicles does not meet current best practices by safety experts. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends parents and caregivers delay motor vehicle restraint transitions for as long as possible and determine transitions based on height, weight, and child safety seat manufacturer limits.<sup>3</sup> **However, Iowa's law allows parents to make these transitions much sooner than what is recommended to protect child passengers on the road and relies primarily on age for determining transitions.**

## CHILD PASSENGER SAFETY IN IOWA

Over the past five years (2019-2023) in Iowa, 245 children ages birth to 18 were killed in motor vehicle crashes and 1,172 were seriously injured.<sup>4</sup> Safety restraints (car seats, booster seats and seat belts) are crucial to reduce injuries and deaths from crashes. Using the correct restraint for the child’s height and weight and using it properly maximizes protection and reduces the tragic outcomes of crashes.

### Iowa’s current child passenger safety law

Since 2004, Iowa has not upgraded most of its child passenger safety requirements. Currently:

- Children must ride in an appropriate rear-facing child safety seat until one year of age and at least 20 pounds.
- Children must ride in a child safety seat or a booster seat through age five.
- Children ages six through ten must ride in a booster seat or a seat belt. In 2009, this was raised to age 17.

Parents and caregivers can choose to use their restraint system longer than the law requires, using height and weight guidelines of the car safety seat (CSS) or booster seat.

Iowa law leaves child passengers less protected by allowing parents and caregivers to transition their children:



- From a rear-facing seat to a forward-facing seat at least 1 year sooner than recommended.
- To a booster seat at least 3 years sooner than recommended.
- To only a seat belt 2-6 years sooner than recommended and to the front seat with seat belt 7 years sooner than recommended.

Best child passenger safety (CPS) practices according to the American Academy of Pediatrics <sup>3</sup>	How does Iowa’s CPS law compare?
<b>Rear-facing CSS*:</b> Infants and toddlers until they reach the highest weight or height allowed by the CSS’s manufacturer, usually <b>2 years or more.</b>	Rear-facing CSS until 1 year of age and at least 20 lbs
<b>Forward-facing CSS with harness:</b> All children who have outgrown the rear-facing weight or height limit for their CSS until the highest weight or height allowed by the CSS’s manufacturer.	Forward-facing CSS or a booster seat through age 5
<b>Belt-positioning booster seat:</b> All children whose weight or height is above the forward-facing limit for their CSS until the vehicle lap and shoulder seat belt fits properly (usually at 4 ft 9 inches and between <b>8 and 12 years</b> ).	Seat belt or booster seat ages 6 to 17
<b>Position in car using seat belt:</b> All children younger than 13 years should be restrained in the rear seats of vehicles for optimal protection.	No age requirement for front seat with seat belt
*CSS = car safety seat	

## Less child restraint and proper restraint use in recent years in Iowa

Funded by the Iowa Governor’s Traffic Safety Bureau, a child passenger safety survey was conducted from 1996 – 2023. Each year, study teams observed child restraint and surveyed drivers at gas stations in 36 communities (population 1,400 to over 200,000) throughout the state. What we found:

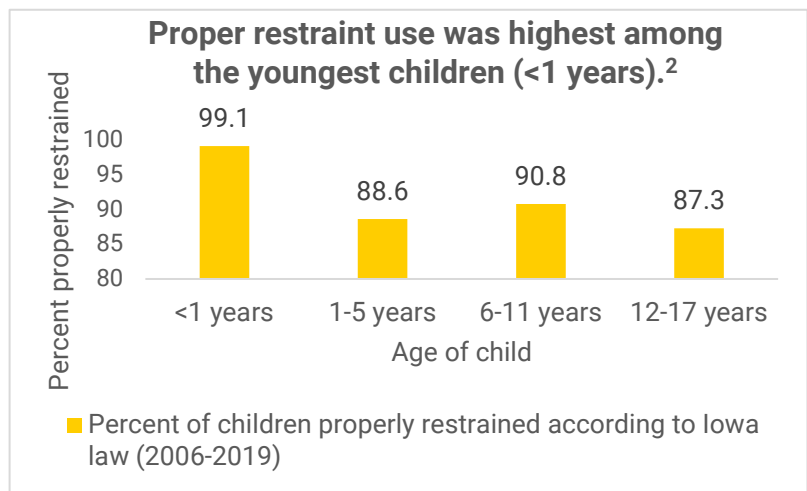


- **Despite overall improvements over the decades, 2023 saw the lowest restraint use of children** (ages 17 and under) by any means (91.7%) and lowest proper restraint use according to Iowa law (84.5%) in the past five years.<sup>1</sup>
- **Many young children are not restrained in accordance with Iowa law:** In 2023, 23.8% of children ages 2 to 5 were not secured in a car safety seat or booster seat.<sup>1</sup>

## 14 years of child passenger safety data: Nearly 12% of Iowa children were at risk.

Teams from the UI Injury Prevention Research Center observed around 45,000 child passengers from birth to age 18 in 36 Iowa communities from 2005-2019.<sup>6</sup>

- Although child restraint use increased for all age groups during these years, 8.2% were completely unrestrained and 3.6% were not properly restrained in accordance with Iowa law, **leaving 11.8% of Iowan children at risk.**<sup>6</sup>
- **Rural areas had consistently lower child restraint use** (85.4%) than urban areas (90.4%) from 2006-2019.<sup>2</sup> However, in 2023, children in communities with a population between 10,000- and 49,999 had the lowest rates of both being properly restrained according to Iowa law or restrained by any means.<sup>1</sup>



## References

1. [Are Iowa Children Buckled Up?](#) Results from Iowa’s 2023 Child Passenger Restraint Survey.
2. Hamann, C. J., Missikpode, C., & Peek-Asa, C. (2021). [Trends in pediatric passenger restraint use by Rurality and age in Iowa, 2006–2019.](#) Traffic Injury Prevention, 23(1), 23–28.
3. [Pediatrics](#). (2018) 142 (5): e20182460.
4. [Iowa Crash Analysis Tool.](#) Accessed 10/03/24.
5. Missikpode, C., Hamann, C. J., & Peek-Asa, C. (2021). [Association between driver and child passenger restraint: Analysis of community-based observational survey data from 2005 to 2019.](#) Journal of Safety Research, 79, 168–172.