

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Work zone speeding: Kansas troopers see, hear

By Tim Potter, KDOT Public Affairs Manager

Ever found yourself driving in a Kansas Department of Transportation highway work zone and noticing that others seem oblivious to the reduced posted speed limit?

Why do people speed in work zones – despite the life-and-death risks – and even when they can face higher fines? What excuses do they give?

We asked four Kansas Highway Patrol troopers scattered across the state, and here's what they told us:

"They're late to work is the number one excuse I get," said KHP Lt. Cory Beard, who works in the Kansas City metro area. Other excuses Beard hears: They didn't see the lower-speed signs. Their GPS program on their phone didn't tell them the speed was lowered because of the work zone.

How fast do they go in work zones? "I stopped a couple of 90s last year on K-10," early one morning while using speed-detection equipment, Beard said. Although the posted speed limit had been reduced to 55 mph or so, Beard recalled, "They knew exactly what they were doing" when going around 90. "Some people just flat out don't obey the speed limit sign."

One morning last year, in the middle of a busy bridge construction zone on K-10 at DeSoto, Beard spotted a Ford F-250 truck zipping along at 80. After he stopped the driver and approached him, the man was "very argumentative," Beard recalled. The man contended that the GPS program on his phone said there wasn't a reduced speed limit. When Beard offered to escort the man back through the work zone so the man could see the signs with the lower speed limit, the man declined. Beard issued him a ticket.

Technical Trooper Tiffany (Bush) Baylark, who also works in the Kansas City metro area, said work zone speeders often tell her they didn't see construction occurring – "nothing going on" — so they didn't think they had to slow down, or so they say.

Baylark explained to them that even though it appeared that work wasn't underway, a work zone often means that driving lanes have been shifted, sometimes moving two-way traffic closer together, sometimes adjusting traffic partly onto a shoulder, where tires roll on different types of pavement. Overall, the traffic flow is altered and constricted, so there is "no room for error," and it makes sense to slow down, she tells them.

Technical Trooper Chad Crittenden, who works in the Wichita area, said he often hears this: "Well, there was nobody working in the construction zone." And this: "I just didn't see the signs." Which tells him, he said, "People are just not paying attention."

Example: When he is checking the speed of vehicles, visible in his patrol car, passing speeders will wave at him while driving 15 to 20 mph over the limit. "They don't even process that they're in a construction zone."

Construction workers in a work zone are particularly vulnerable, he said, because they have to work close to the traffic while concentrating on a task, like cutting concrete. "They're basically relying on the motoring public to not be drunk, drowsy and distracted as they drive through."

Technical Trooper Michael Racy, who covers the southwestern part of the state, said: "The feedback I get from drivers (caught speeding in work zones), most of them will just say, 'I'm keeping up with the flow of traffic.' And the other excuse I hear a lot is, 'I didn't know I was in a construction zone.'"

Yet, Racy said, KDOT has plenty of signs out posting the lower speed limit. "Everybody knows there's a construction zone" – or should.

To sum it up, we asked troopers why it's important not to speed in construction zones:

- Lt. Candice Breshears, a KHP spokeswoman, put it this way: "Throughout a construction zone, whether crews are working or not, the speed limit is what is posted. It's important to always pay attention because the roadways can change throughout construction zones. Even if there are no workers present that you notice, the company could be moving equipment, or the speed limit could be for your safety, such as if there is a drop-off between lanes. We also remind motorists that fines can be doubled in construction zones."
- Lt. Beard: "I understand: You all have places to go. But just go the speed limit. We all have somebody we want to go home to. We just want everybody to take it safe and get to their destination."
- Trooper Baylark: "It's dangerous for yourself, others around you and the workers. It's not worth the risk of injuries" or even the traffic delay caused by a crash. "When you speed, you increase your chances of being involved in a crash. It kind of defeats your purpose of going fast, especially in a construction zone."
- Trooper Crittenden: "The faster you go, the more violent it's going to be (if you crash). The ultimate goal is we don't have to write tickets in construction zones because we have compliance." Crittenden asks that motorists try to imagine themselves having to work right next to a car that can instantly become a multi-ton missile if it goes out of control. "They don't think about if something goes wrong, somebody could die."
- Trooper Racy: "The KDOT workers and work zone workers have families. Their lives are important too. If you are speeding, you have less time to react."

That's the human side of speeding in work zones. What do the statistics show? Two speed-related situations – following too closely and driving too fast for conditions -- were among the top five contributing circumstances in work zone crashes from 2009 through 2021, according to KDOT.

Here are some key findings among the data:

- Since 2009, 74 people have died in work zone crashes. Of the 74 who died, 68 were motorists, and six were pedestrians. In 2021, there were 1,182 total work zone crashes. Six of the crashes were fatal, and 265 involved injuries. Among work zone crashes last year, seven people died, and 368 were injured.
- The highest number of work zone crashes since 2009: 2,145 in 2016.
- The highest number of work zone crash deaths during that period: 12 in 2017.

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