

Hands on the Wheel

Improving safety and boosting communities through removing barriers to driver's licenses

By Laura Goren and Ashley Kenneth

Virginians are safer when more of the drivers on our roads are trained, tested, licensed, and insured. That's why Virginia has such strong education and training requirements for new drivers. And our communities and economy are stronger when more residents are able to participate in everyday life without breaking the rules of the road by driving without a license. Thirteen states and the District of Columbia will allow unauthorized immigrants to obtain driver's licenses or some other form of driver's card by the end of 2019, and another state will implement driver's license access regardless of immigration status in January 2021. Expanding access to driver's licenses for unauthorized immigrants would increase safety and help Virginia's economy and communities.

Safety First

The facts don't support the concern that providing driver's licenses to unauthorized immigrants will lead to an increase in traffic accidents. Road safety has improved in the US in the last two decades since some states have started authorizing licenses for unauthorized immigrants. And the states with the longest track

record of offering access to licenses for unauthorized immigrants have seen bigger drops in traffic fatalities than the country as a whole. Since 1994, the early adopter states have all seen 12% or greater drops in traffic fatalities, compared to a nationwide 9% drop.

One reason for these safety improvements in early adopter states may be that a greater share of drivers have undergone the training and testing required to get a license.

Virginia law requires that new driver's license applicants who are under the age of 19 complete a state-approved driver's education program, including classroom and on-the-road experience. Those over age 19 who don't have a valid license from any state or country must (1) show proof of successful completion of a driver's education course or hold a learner's permit for 60 days, and (2) pass a two-part knowledge exam and road skills test. Applicants age 19 or older who have a valid license from a country other than the U.S., Canada, Germany, or France must pass a two-part knowledge exam and road skills test. All must pass a vision screening.



THE
COMMONWEALTH
INSTITUTE

All this testing and training helps build knowledge of the road rules and proper driving techniques.

Another safety advantage is that licensed drivers appear to be less likely to leave the scene of an accident, and experience in other states shows that expanding access to driver's licenses reduces the rate of hit-and-run accidents.

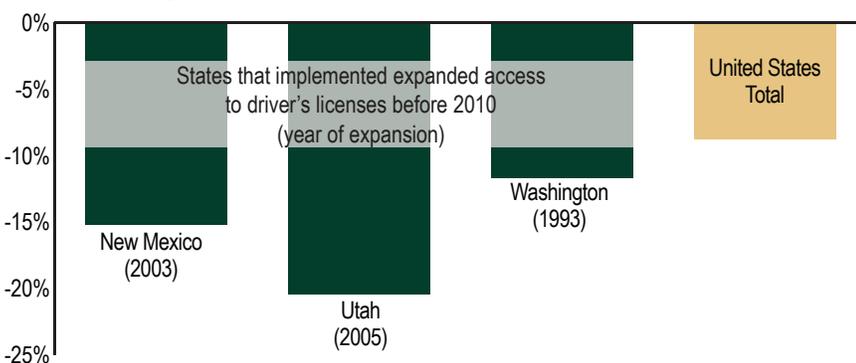
The states with the longest track records of offering access to licenses for unauthorized immigrants have seen bigger drops in traffic fatalities than the country as a whole.

Almost by definition, it is difficult to get data on the drivers involved in hit-and-run accidents, but a study by the AAA of crashes from 2001 to 2005 found that 41% of hit-and-run drivers whose license status could eventually be determined had an invalid license or no license. Of drivers who remained at the scene of a crash, just 11% had an invalid license or no license. Issuing driver's licenses regardless of immigration status can reduce the chance of hit-and-run accidents — studies in two states that issue licenses regardless of immigration status show that doing so has decreased the rate of hit-and-run accidents in those states.

Having drivers and witnesses remain at the scene of an accident is important for many reasons, and can be particularly critical when a pedestrian or bicyclist is struck, since the survival of these vulnerable road users may depend on someone immediately calling for medical assistance.

Expanded Access, Decreased Fatalities

Percent change in traffic fatalities, 1994 to 2017



Source: TCI analysis of traffic fatalities data from the NHTSA FARS data tables

Trained, Tested, and Verified

Virginia requirements to get a license, by type of prior license (if any)

Type of prior license (if any)	Drivers ed or learner's permit	Knowledge exam and road skills test	Vision exam	Identification and residency verification	License Fee
No valid license <i>(likely category for many Virginians who are unauthorized)</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Valid license from another U.S. state, Canada, Germany, or France			✓	✓	✓
Valid license from a different country		✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Code of Virginia and Department of Motor Vehicles website

Note: These requirements are for Virginians age 19 or older; the requirements are more stringent for younger drivers.

In addition to improving safety, everyone benefits when all vehicles and drivers are insured. One of every 10 Virginia drivers lacked automobile insurance as of 2015, according to estimates based on insurance claims data. Technically, car insurance covers vehicles, not people, but expanding access to licenses may reduce the number of uninsured vehicles, since newly licensed drivers may be more confident, motivated, and able to get proper insurance for their cars. Unlicensed drivers may have difficulty even finding insurers to cover them, since there would be no way for the insurer to verify driving record or ability. Providing access to licenses may remove some of these barriers.

A strong economy and communities also matter

Getting more drivers licensed also improves our communities and economy. Driving is a necessity for most families, not a choice. Expanding access to licenses would help parents get to parent-teacher conferences, families get to church, and workers get to their jobs.

Unauthorized immigrants are already a part of Virginia's economy and communities, with many living in "mixed-

status" families with lawfully present and U.S. citizen relatives. Access to licenses would not only help the individual unauthorized immigrant, it would also help their relatives and other community members.

Along with these family and community benefits, there are a number of potential economic benefits from expanding access to driver's licenses. Newly licensed workers could fill job openings far from public transportation that would otherwise have remained empty. Agricultural employers could see an increase in the share of their workers who are trained, tested, and licensed drivers. And car insurance costs could go down for everyone if there's increased road safety and decreases in the number of uninsured drivers.

Practical considerations for Virginia

Virginia policymakers who might be considering expanding access to driver's licenses must consider practical matters as well as the potential impact on road safety, Virginia's economy, and communities.

Expanding access to driver's licenses for unauthorized immigrants can be done while complying with federal REAL ID

requirements. Most other states that have expanded driver's licenses access have complied with these requirements by including people regardless of immigration status in their system of "standard" (non-REAL ID) driver's licenses. Virginia already has a two-part driver's license system for those who cannot or choose not to pay an additional fee and comply with the federal requirements to obtain a REAL ID-compliant license.

Conclusion

There are good reasons to deny some people access to driving. Those who have a track record of driving recklessly or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, for example, should not be allowed to endanger everyone else on the road. But the vast majority of unauthorized immigrants who want to participate in the system of testing and licensure are not in this category and should be provided the chance to learn and abide by the rules of Virginia's roads. Expanding access to driver's licenses would increase safety and help Virginia's economy and communities.

The Commonwealth Institute

The Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis provides credible, independent and accessible information and analyses of state public policies with particular attention to the impacts on low- and moderate-income persons. Our products inform state economic, fiscal, and budget policy debates and contribute to sound decisions that improve the well-being of individuals, communities and Virginia as a whole. Contact 804-396-2051 or go to www.thecommonwealthinstitute.org for more information.