



Research Shows Driver's Licenses for Undocumented People Improve Public Safety

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Testimony Submitted to the Minnesota House Judiciary and Public Safety Committee

ATTN: The Honorable Ron Latz

Josh Smith, Immigration Research Manager at the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University

Chair Latz and committee members,

I am Josh Smith, an immigration researcher at the Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University (CGO).

House File 4 proposes extending driving privileges to those who live in Minnesota regardless of their immigration status.¹ This would bring the state's practices in line with 18 other states, including my own home state of Utah.²

This is a public safety question. Does granting driver's licenses to undocumented people improve public safety? Academic research conducted in states that have made this switch shows that public safety improves when states provide driver's licenses to people regardless of their immigration status.

Specifically, research shows that granting driving privileges to undocumented people:

1. Reduces the likelihood of hit-and-runs,⁸
2. Increases the number of drivers with insurance,⁹
3. Reduces insurance costs for all drivers in the state,¹⁰ and
4. Does not increase rates of car crash fatalities.¹¹

The most compelling findings here are those concerning hit-and-runs. The current system incentivizes hit-and-runs. An undocumented driver who cannot obtain a license is also barred from purchasing car insurance. They are more likely to flee from car crashes because they fear the financial and legal repercussions.

States that have revised their licensing rules have seen significant drops in the number of hit-and-runs. In 2015, California stopped requiring a social security number for obtaining a driver's license. In a study comparing crashes before and after the rule change, researchers found that the total number of crashes didn't fall, but the number of hit-and-runs did, especially in counties that had issued more of the new licenses. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety cites California's change among their countermeasures to respond to the increasing number of hit-and-runs.³

Though preventing crashes is the first public safety goal, mitigating their severity is the next step when prevention is not possible. As such, having more drivers with insurance and fewer hit-and-runs is a major victory for travel safety. With insurance in place, fender-benders will remain small crashes rather than requiring additional effort from police to investigate and track down the runner.

Of course, these findings should be put in the larger context of driving safety. Driving is more dangerous than most drivers realize. Car crashes are "a leading cause of death in the United States for people ages 1–54," according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.⁴ Pedestrian deaths are rising in the United States, and dangerous driving seems to have increased since 2020.⁵

Policymakers across the country are grappling with how to handle these complicated travel safety issues. In relation to questions about who should be allowed to drive, however, the answer is simple: All drivers should be required to meet safety standards. Undocumented people are already living and driving in Minnesota. Allowing them to obtain a legal driver's license if they meet safety standards, regardless of their immigration status, incentivizes them to learn and practice those safety standards. This makes road travel safer for everyone.

Providing driver's licenses is also likely to improve the assimilation and integration of migrants and their families.⁶ But introducing immigration enforcement considerations into state licensing practices is likely to backfire, making it harder for immigrants and their children to integrate and be successful in their communities.⁷

Existing research shows that there is little to fear and much to gain in offering driver's licenses to people living and working in Minnesota, regardless of their immigration status.

Thank you for considering the CGO's research on these questions. We are happy to discuss the findings with you in more detail or provide additional testimony if desired.

Sincerely,

Josh Smith, *Research Manager, The Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University*

Endnotes

- 1 "HF 4," Minnesota Legislature, accessed January 12, 2023, <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/bill.php?f=HF4&b=-house&y=2023&ssn=0>.
- 2 "States Offering Driver's Licenses to Immigrants," Brief (National Conference of State Legislatures, October 11, 2022), <https://www.ncsl.org/immigration/states-offering-drivers-licenses-to-immigrants>.
- 3 "Hit-and-Run Crashes: Prevalence, Contributing Factors and Countermeasures" (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, April 2018), <https://aaafoundation.org/hit-and-run-crashes-prevalence-contributing-factors-and-countermeasures/>.
- 4 "Global Road Safety," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 10, 2023, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/global-road-safety/index.html>.
- 5 Elizabeth Petraglia and Kara Maceck, "Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State - 2021 Preliminary Data (January-December)" (Governors Highway Safety Association, May 2022), <https://www.ghsa.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Pedestrian%20Traffic%20Fatalities%20by%20State%20-%202021%20Preliminary%20Data%20%28January-December%29.pdf>.
- 6 Lueders et al. "Providing Driver's Licenses," 2017, 4115.
- 7 Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes, "On Immigration Enforcement and Immigrant Assimilation" (The Center for Growth and Opportunity at Utah State University, March 15, 2022), <https://www.thecgo.org/benchmark/on-immigration-enforcement-and-immigrant-assimilation/>.
- 8 Hans Lueders, Jens Hainmueller, and Duncan Lawrence, "Providing Driver's Licenses to Unauthorized Immigrants in California Improves Traffic Safety," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, no. 16 (April 18, 2017): 4111–16, doi:10.1073/pnas.1618991114.
- 9 Brandyn F. Churchill, Taylor Mackay, and Bing Yang Tan, "Unauthorized Immigrants' Access to Driver's Licenses and Auto Insurance Coverage," *Contemporary Economic Policy* 39, no. 1 (2021): e12492, doi:10.1111/coep.12492. An ungated working paper version is available on the CGO's website: <https://www.thecgo.org/research/drivers-licenses-for-unauthorized-immigrants-and-auto-insurance/>.
- 10 Mauricio Cáceres and Kenneth P. Jameson, "The Effects on Insurance Costs of Restricting Undocumented Immigrants' Access to Driver Licenses: Undocumented Driver Restrictions," *Southern Economic Journal* 81, no. 4 (April 2015): 907–27, doi:10.1002/soej.12022.
- 11 Lueders et al. "Providing Driver's Licenses," 2017.