

Driver's Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants Lead to Drop in Hit-and-run Accidents

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Hit-and-run accidents have long been a problem in California and Los Angeles in particular. When people are victims of hit-and-run drivers, they may be left facing severe injuries and have difficulty with holding the responsible parties accountable. Under California law, drivers who are involved in accidents are required to remain at the scene for law enforcement officers. When they instead flee, they may face criminal liability as a result.

Historically, one issue that led to some drivers fleeing the scenes of accidents is that some of them were undocumented immigrants. They fled because of fears of being deported based on driving without licenses and insurance. California passed a law in 2013 that became effective on Jan. 1, 2015 that allows undocumented immigrants to get special driver's licenses to prevent them from driving without licenses and insurance, and a study has shown that the availability of these driver's licenses has led to a decrease in the number of hit-and-run accidents in the state.

California AB 60

Under California AB 60, undocumented immigrants are allowed to apply for a special type of California driver's license by showing proof of their identity along with proof of residency in the state. The licenses that are given are not able to be used for identification purposes. People must pass the required driving tests in order to obtain them. It is against the law for others to discriminate against drivers who hold the AB 60 driver's licenses. The licenses can be used for people to be able to drive anywhere in the state. They have notations on the front that state that the licenses are for driving purposes only. The law forbids law enforcement officers from using the licenses as a means to determine the holders' immigration status or citizenship. Police may also not use the licenses as a basis to detain the holders for anything other than violating traffic laws.

Effect of California AB 60

Researchers at the Immigration Policy Lab at Stanford University were interested in studying how the availability of the AB 60 driver's licenses has impacted hit-and-run driving rates in the state. Since the licenses became available, more than 800,000 people have been able to get driving privileges in California. The researchers found that the driving-only licenses have led to a reduction in the number of hit-and-run accidents and have saved insured drivers an estimated \$17 million that they otherwise

would have had to absorb when at-fault drivers flee.

A professor at Columbia University stated that more research is needed in order to determine whether or not the law has actually decreased hit-and-run collisions. Since the law, the number of traffic accidents overall has not decreased, but hit-and-run accidents have. The Columbia University professor conceded that the licenses have not led to a decrease in safety, however.

Proponents of the law have argued that people who are in the country illegally are likelier to flee accidents that they cause when they don't have driver's licenses. Undocumented immigrants may do so because of fears of being arrested and subsequently deported. Supporters state that undocumented immigrants are more likely to remain at the scenes of accidents that they cause when they have driver's licenses because they wouldn't have to worry about the threat of being arrested or detained.

Having the ability to get driver's licenses is important for both undocumented immigrants and the public at large. An estimated 11 million people are in the country illegally. In states in which they are unable to get driver's licenses, the undocumented immigrants are still likely to get behind the wheel, driving without insurance and licenses. Twelve states, including California, Colorado, New Mexico, Delaware and others, now allow undocumented immigrants to obtain special driver's licenses in an effort to curb the problem of hit-and-run driving offenses. Opponents of the driver's licenses argue that they allow people who are in the country illegally to have a type of legal documentation to which they shouldn't be entitled.

The total number of licenses that California has issued under AB 60 is about 850,000. Authorities report that the number of new vehicle registrations during the same period was far lower than the number of people who received the specialized licenses, leading researchers to believe that many of the undocumented immigrants were already driving vehicles that were registered but simply did not also have licenses.

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