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# Another View: Driver's license is a vital link to employment

By **JOHN PAWASARAT**

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The most important work force issue facing inner city Milwaukee residents is access to jobs - jobs that are increasingly beyond the Milwaukee County bus lines. Yet for almost 20 years, the City of Milwaukee municipal court has systematically suspended driver's licenses of tens of thousands of mostly African-American city residents as punishment for not paying non-driving-related fines.

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In 2003 alone, the Milwaukee municipal court issued 68,191 license suspensions to city residents for not paying civil forfeitures; 81% of these suspensions were issued to African-Americans, 9% to Latinos and


9% to whites. As a result, only one-third of young men in poorer neighborhoods have a valid driver's license.

This problem is compounded by a 400% increase in state prisoners released to Milwaukee County since 1993. Most of these 26,772 ex-offenders are men without a high school diploma, without a driver's license and who are unlikely to secure sustained full-time employment.

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Employment & Training Institute has conducted extensive employment research on the importance of a driver's license over the past 15 years. Among the findings:

- Mothers with young children on welfare and in subsidized child care were twice as likely to find sustained employment if they had a driver's license. For this population, having a driver's license was more important for finding steady work than a high school diploma.
  - Many Milwaukee teens are unlikely to be employed full time as adults due to non-driving suspensions. Of 4,708 teens given suspensions for non-payment of juvenile fines, two years later (at ages 18 and 19) only 392 (8%) had a driver's license.
  - Minorities are most likely to have driver's license problems related to fine collections. Only 47% of African-Americans and 43% of Latinos have a driver's license compared to 85% of whites. For adults ages 18 to 24 who should be entering the work force, the situation is even worse: Only 26% of African-Americans and 34% of Latinos have licenses compared to 71% of whites.
- Those who continue to drive to work with suspended licenses often are stopped for minor vehicle or traffic infractions only to be cited for driving under suspension or revocation - far more serious offenses.
- While the city enforces largely race-based license suspension and revocation policies, its future labor force is increasingly minority. Metro Milwaukee has the youngest African-American population among the 100 largest metro areas in the United States. Its Asian population is fourth-youngest and its Latino population is ninth-youngest, while the white population ranks 61st.

### Driver's Licenses



The Journal Sentinel Editorial Board invited four advocates for reform of how driver's license suspensions are handled to discuss their ideas.

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Lack of transportation to jobs is the most serious barrier to employment for city residents of all ages.

Job seekers without a driver's license and without a high school diploma have little hope of full-time employment and too often resort to crime. Ex-prisoners are the least likely to find sustained employment because of persistent legal problems, low education levels, high recidivism rates and driver's license suspension and revocation problems.

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The spatial mismatch between available jobs and job seekers is most acute in low-income neighborhoods, where job seekers outnumber full-time openings by a gap of seven to one and only a third of unemployed job seekers have a valid driver's license.

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One of the most promising work force initiatives is the Center for Driver's License Recovery & Employability, established to assist those with suspensions for failure to pay outstanding bills. The task is daunting with more than 50,000 people under suspension or without a driver's license.

The City of Milwaukee can help by using collection methods other than taking away residents' right to drive as punishment for not paying fines.

*John Pawasarat is director of UWM's Employment & Training Institute.*

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