

- Economy
- Health care
- Investing
- Workplace
- More...

ENTERTAINMENT

- Entertainment
- Main Page
- Dining
- Movies
- Festivals
- Music and Nightlife
- Performing Arts
- Visual Arts
- TV and Radio
- Books
- Calendars

FEATURES

- Lifestyle
- Advice Columns
- Homes
 - » Neighborhoods
 - » Remodeling
 - » Gardening
- Food/Cooking
- Personal Technology
- Health/Science
- Religion
- Cars
- Travel

AP COVERAGE

- National
- World
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment

NEED HELP?

- Searching Articles
- Photo Archives
- Placing an Ad
- Setting Your Home Page
- Newspaper Subscriptions
- Jobs @ MJS
- About the Journal Sentinel
- Internships
- Submit News Tips
- Contact Us

FAQ

Questions about accessing stories? See our Frequently Asked Questions page.

PARTNER SITES

- MKEonline.com
- MilwaukeeMoms
- TODAY'S TMJ4
- 620 WTMJ
- 94.5 WKTI

Editorial: The poor take a big hit if a license becomes a club

Officials should scotch laws that take away driving rights for non-driving offenses. The lack of a license amounts to a big competitive disadvantage in a metro area built for the automobile.

From the Journal Sentinel

Posted: June 16, 2007

What's the No. 1 barrier to a job in Milwaukee? A lack of a high school diploma? A lack of skills? A prison record? No, no and no. Rather, the lack of a valid driver's license keeps a worker from landing employment here more than any other single factor.



Hugh Downs Reports:

Little-known heart attack symptom many people tragically ignore
Healthsecrets.com

Lose 15 Pounds This Month

Oprah and CBS featured Hoodia, a dieting miracle. Try a Free Sample
www.hoodiaxi.net

Lawmakers have only made the problem worse by requiring or permitting the suspension or revocation of driver's licenses for offenses that have nothing to do with being behind the wheel. They must rescind such laws, which are currently hobbling thousands.

The Journal Sentinel Editorial Board convened a panel of experts last week to explore this issue, which, like a cloaked Klingon Bird of Prey on "Star Trek," looms large and menacing yet is invisible to many people.

The panel consisted of Jim Gramling, a recently retired Milwaukee municipal judge; Herman John, a retired Milwaukee County deputy district attorney and vice chairman of a Milwaukee Bar Association committee looking at the issue of driver's license suspensions and revocations; Tyrone Dumas, a Milwaukee Public Schools official and community activist who has long toiled on the issue; and John Pawasarat, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Employment & Training Institute director who has researched the issue.

[Buy a link here](#)

The scope of the problem boggles the mind. More than

89,000 county residents hold suspended or revoked licenses, according to the Employment & Training Institute. That's one of every eight county residents at least 15 years of age. What's more, more than half of that number *never* held actual licenses.

It's Wisconsin's own "Twilight Zone," where your license can be suspended, most commonly for failure to pay a municipal fine, even if you've never bothered to obtain a license in the first place. And before actually getting it, you must clear the suspension.

Naturally, this problem is concentrated in poor neighborhoods, where it exacerbates other ills. Thus, Pawasarat reports that in ZIP code 53206, almost two-thirds of African-American men in their 30s had spent or are spending time in prison. And less than 6% of these current and former inmates had valid driver's licenses. Most, however, had license suspensions, mostly for not paying fines.

Putting former inmates to work - a task that leads to safer communities - is challenging enough. The license problem makes the task that much harder in a metro area where it takes a car to reach many jobs.

Since many license suspensions start out as parking citations, the inner city is particularly vulnerable. Half of such citations are for parking overnight on the street without a permit. Street parking is widely necessary in the dense inner city.

Juveniles face the threat of a loss of license if they do drugs, skip school or fail to pay municipal fines - a threat John notes works better with middle-class kids than poor kids, for whom the prospects of owning a car are much slimmer.

What's more, needy kids are likelier to live in neighborhoods where a good many residents drive despite lack of valid

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.

[WATCH THE VIDEO](#)

Related Coverage

- [Editorial:](#) The poor take a big hit if a license becomes a club
- [Another View:](#) Driver's license is a vital link to employment

CNI Newspapers
Lake Country

licenses - compounding their legal woes when they're caught and tying up the resources of the criminal justice system. The problem got so bad that a Milwaukee County court was designated to handle only driving-after-revocation charges, and it was swamped, accumulating a backlog of 15,000 cases.

JSOnline AdLinks

Hugh Downs Reports:

Little-known heart attack symptom many people tragically ignore
Healthsecrets.com

Most of that backlog has since vanished and for a reason that is instructive: State Transportation Secretary Frank Busalacchi redefined "habitual traffic offender," a definition that comes with an automatic five-year revocation. He stopped including citations for vehicle-related problems. Now only driving violations, such as speeding and drunken driving, are counted. And he applied the narrowed definition retroactively.

The move makes sense. Cars with broken taillights and faulty mufflers will still be cited. But revocation will be reserved for problem drivers, as opposed to drivers of cars in disrepair.

Wisconsin could use more such common sense in solving this problem. On the basis of suggestions from our panel, we recommend:

- Gov. Jim Doyle and the Legislature follow the lead of most other states and opt out of a federal mandate that Wisconsin suspend for six months the driver's licenses of convicted drug felons.
- The Milwaukee Common Council bar the use by municipal judges of license suspensions for failure to pay fines. The judges instead should be encouraged to use such alternatives as community service, the setup of payment plans and the interception of state income tax refunds.
- Lawmakers in Washington, Madison and municipal halls end penalties calling for the suspension or revocation of driver's licenses for offenses that have nothing to do with driving.
- Employers require driver's licenses only if driving is necessary to do the job or to get to the job. Some companies require licenses even when a car is not essential.
- The state bring back driver's education to schools. It has been squeezed out of many, which has affected poor kids particularly. Better-off teens enroll in private programs. Perhaps the state could set up an arrangement similar to the federal meal program, in which the poor don't pay but others do. And perhaps traffic fines could be used to pay for that program.
- Officials strengthen programs to help residents pay fines and clean their records.

[Buy a link here](#)

JSOnline AdLinks

[Hugh Downs Reports:](#)

Little-known heart attack symptom many people tragically ignore
Healthsecrets.com

[Lose 15 Pounds This Month](#)

Oprah and CBS featured Hoodia, a dieting miracle. Try a Free Sample
www.hoodiaxl.net

[Accredited Online Degrees](#)

Explore Over 120 Online Schools and Find the One that Fits Your Needs.
www.ClassesUSA.com

[Free Fundraising Kit](#)

50 Tips for Running a Successful Auction. Get a free auction kit!
www.cmarket.com

[Buy a link here](#)

From the June 17, 2007 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
Have an opinion on this story? [Write a letter to the editor.](#)

Don't miss one more day of local news and money-saving offers! [Subscribe Today!](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)