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Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – how would it affect Massachusetts?

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Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – how would it affect public safety?

How it improves traffic safety



Studies show that roads are safer in states that allow undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers licenses.¹

Drivers with licenses – whether immigrant or U.S. citizen – are less likely to leave the site of a crash than those without them:

- In Florida's Orange County, at a time when license suspensions were high, officials saw significant increases in hit-and-run crashes by unlicensed drivers. "If a driver is suspended and involved in a collision, whether they are at fault or not, they are usually not inclined to await a police response," wrote the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators.² **Undocumented drivers have even more cause to fear police contact, even if they are not at fault for a crash.**
- When California passed its law to license undocumented drivers, it saw **up to 10 percent fewer hit-and-run crashes per year**. Similarly, Connecticut found a 9 percent decrease in hit-and-run crashes in the few years after it enabled undocumented drivers to obtain licenses.³

Access to driver's licenses also means better access to car insurance. Both Utah and New Mexico saw **dramatic decreases in their rates of**

uninsured drivers when they began licensing undocumented drivers – by 80 percent and 60 percent.⁴ Not-at-fault drivers in California also avoided a total \$3.5 million in out-of-pocket expenses for car repairs after that state began licensing undocumented drivers.⁵

States that license undocumented drivers saw dramatic **drops in rates of uninsured drivers.**

Utah
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New Mexico
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Immigrants tend to be more law-abiding

Studies repeatedly find no association between immigration and crime.⁶ It is well-established that immigrants are more law-abiding than U.S. citizens.⁷ One study in Miami found **that assault rates and drug activity were somewhat lower in neighborhoods with high immigration rates.**⁸

In fact, some scholars find immigration, undocumented immigrants, and granting immigrants valid status are associated with *drops* in crime.⁹

Stanford Economics Prof. Scott Baker, for instance, found that the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 – which simultaneously gave millions of immigrants documented status and made it harder for undocumented workers to get jobs – was associated with drops in crime. For each 1 percent of a county's population granted documentation, **the study observed a 2 percent to 5 percent drop in crime overall.** This translates into 160,000 to 480,000 fewer crimes committed each year nationally because of this law.¹⁰ This

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reduction was particularly linked to property crimes, primarily through the labor market.

Further, scholars have found that ostensibly crime-fighting initiatives like the Secure Communities Program — which asks state and local law enforcement to help federal authorities identify people for deportation — do not reduce crime rates.¹¹

Economists from the University of California further found that, while Secure Communities was intended to give local police more tools to fight crime, results show **it did not improve law enforcement's ability to solve crimes** (as measured by “clearance rates,” or the crimes cleared by arrest).¹²

The evidence strongly suggests that if Massachusetts granted licenses to eligible drivers without status it may decrease crime and would not increase it.



How immigrant enforcement can impair safety

Some studies have found that, in fact, policies restricting immigrants' activities or that create fear amongst immigrant communities can impede public safety.

Lack of trust in public institutions can make it difficult for public safety personnel to do their jobs. For instance, fearful immigrants are less likely to report when they have been victims of crimes.

Victims of domestic violence are at particular risk when they are unable to access state driver's

licenses. A national survey of law enforcement officers, judges, and prosecutors found that — amid increasingly hostile federal immigration policies — immigrants have become **more reluctant to report domestic violence, human trafficking, and sexual assault**. 82 percent of prosecutors reported that domestic violence has become more difficult to investigate or prosecute as a result of fear of immigration consequences.¹³

This makes it difficult for public safety officials to do their jobs and leaves victims in dangerous circumstances.

How licensing undocumented drivers can advance racial equity

Both racial inequality and income inequality can affect the overall well-being of a community.¹⁴ Immigration enforcement policies can both **worsen racial inequality and undermine community trust in public institutions**.

Scholars have noted that, while immigration enforcement policies appear on the surface “race-blind”, they are deeply racialized. Latinx and Black immigrants are overrepresented among immigrants detained and deported. Latinx immigrants often express fear of racial profiling and negative stereotypes even if they possess valid immigration status.¹⁵

As federal immigration agencies increasingly rely on local authorities to identify undocumented immigrants, many are concerned that this encourages local police to racially profile people who they believe to be undocumented — often people of color.¹⁶

Offering driver's licenses to immigrants without status can be one step toward racial equity in the state. **Most of Massachusetts' undocumented population (69 percent) are people of color**¹⁷ — granting licenses to eligible drivers would not only improve their families' financial stability, it also would help them better integrate in community life.

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Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – how would it shape child health?

Massachusetts has long depended on immigrants to maintain its population and workforce.

Immigrants and their children are the state's future leaders, health workers, food service workers, and teachers. **Setting up children for success is key to building a strong economic future.**

Immigrants' and their families' well-being are profoundly affected by discriminatory and draconian actions on that status – whether from institutions or individuals. These health effects can also spill over to the community overall.

There are countless reasons for these negative health effects, from barriers to medical care and good jobs to a climate of fear. These affect people of all ages and all statuses (including U.S. citizens), but children often are on the frontlines of these experiences.

This brief focuses on how the threat of arrest and deportation can affect child health and how access to driver's licenses can be one way to help reduce some of these barriers to well-being.

Children's access to health care



Policies affecting immigrant parents can have a profound effect on their children – many of whom are U.S. citizens.

Several studies show that a climate of hostility toward immigrants can discourage parents from participating in health care or health insurance,

which can negatively affect the health of their children.¹⁸

In some cases, it even affects the quality of care immigrant patients receive.¹⁹

One North Carolina study found that – amid an uptick of immigration enforcement – immigrant mothers didn't necessarily seek prenatal care less, but they sought it later in the pregnancy and **often received worse care than other mothers.**²⁰

By contrast, when Utah began offering undocumented immigrants driver's licenses, immigrant mothers who obtained them were **better able to get adequate prenatal care – possibly because medical providers stigmatized their undocumented status less.**²¹

Children's health and development

Studies show that having an undocumented parent can affect a child's development from their early years through adolescence.

Teens with undocumented parents tend to have **higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms.**²²

As early as age two or three, researchers find that having an undocumented parent **can affect a child's cognitive development.**²³

There are a range of explanations for these health and developmental effects:

- The trauma of being separated or seeing a parent arrested or removed has a profound effect on both adult and child mental health. **The fear of separation alone has been shown to affect child health.**²⁴
- Undocumented parents and their children **face barriers to public programs** – like food assistance or public housing – that have been shown to boost child development. Even if they are eligible, some may be too afraid to enroll.²⁵

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- Undocumented workers often endure **poor work conditions and lower pay**. Not only does this tend to mean they face more stress and more physical demands at work, but they likely have less access to benefits, worker protections, and less control of their schedules to spend time with their kids.²⁶
- Teens and young adults often experience an array of stressors as they fully understand the implications of their or their family members' status. In a large, qualitative study of immigrant youth, some described the process as **"waking up to a nightmare."**²⁷ This can, in turn, affect their educational attainment and nearly erase all the benefits education typically has on mental health. "College-bound youths' trajectories ultimately converge with those who have minimal levels of schooling," wrote Prof. Roberto G. Gonzales who conducted the study. "These youngsters, who committed to the belief that hard work and educational achievement would garner rewards, experience a tremendous fall."²⁸



Having access to a driver's license cannot eliminate these stressors, but it can reduce some of the barriers parents and children face to accessing good jobs, public programs, and conducting basic activities — like picking up their children from school or getting medicine from a pharmacy. (Note that the state driver's

licenses currently being proposed will not affect immigrants' or their family-members' eligibility for public programs.)

Public health

The threat of arrest, deportation, and other disruptions not only affect undocumented people and their families, but the community at large.

Immigrants fearful of arrest or discrimination tend to **avoid interacting with public health agencies, seek fewer preventive services, and report health concerns less readily.**²⁹ People who avoid seeking health services could be more vulnerable to health conditions — **which could in turn affect other people in their communities.**

The daily threat of arrest and deportation — often exacerbated by political rhetoric and high-profile raids — can prevent immigrants from fully integrating into their communities, which can affect overall community cohesion.³⁰ The actual arrest, detention, and deportation of a family's breadwinner could also destabilize a family, the effects of which can spill over into the broader community.

Researchers note access to transportation — including access to a driver's license — is a key tool to help ensure the health of immigrants and other communities.³¹ There also can be unintended benefits — **California, for instance, saw an 18 percent increase in registered organ donors the year it started licensing undocumented drivers.**³²

Licensing drivers without immigration status can have **unintended benefits**.

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Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – how would it make law enforcement more efficient?



Pulling over and arresting undocumented drivers can be a significant **diversion of public safety resources without improving road safety or reducing crime.**

In Massachusetts, if an undocumented driver gets pulled over for a broken tail-light or forgetting to use a turn signal, they risk not only getting a ticket, but deportation by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). These are often the kinds of situations that land immigrants in deportation proceedings.³³

Data show that **54 percent of immigrants arrested in Massachusetts either had no criminal conviction or were arrested for a minor traffic violation.** State and local law enforcement agencies expend much of their resources arresting otherwise law-abiding immigrants.

Research shows that more aggressive police enforcement on immigrants does not improve police efficiency.³⁴ Further, departments that engage in more immigration enforcement did not increase police resources, meaning these resources likely were diverted from other crime-prevention activities.³⁵

Granting licenses to drivers without status would alleviate some of these costs by **reducing unnecessary arrests and reducing the time spent when an undocumented person gets pulled over.**

What is the law enforcement cost of stopping unlicensed immigrant drivers?

Currently when a police officer in Massachusetts stops an undocumented driver, the driver could have valid identification documents from another country. Local police departments may not have adequate training to quickly verify the document. Having a state-issued license assures a local police officer that the person's identity has been verified by the state and allows the officer to quickly and easily confirm the driver's identity. This means the police officer spends more time trying to confirm the validity of the document and the person's identity.

It could also take more of the officer's time waiting for a tow truck to arrive and more time arresting an otherwise law-abiding resident. This takes the officer away from their patrol.

A former California police chief **said officers can spend two or three hours trying to confirm the identity of an undocumented person.**³⁶

While data on traffic stops of undocumented immigrants specifically are scant, it is possible to glean information from research on arrests of unlicensed drivers generally.

Washington State police estimated that each driving-with-license-suspended arrest **took nine hours of an officer's time.**³⁷

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Stopping and arresting an unlicensed, undocumented driver likely takes even more time because they possess identification documents that police tend to be less familiar with.

If the stop results in an arrest and a charge, the officer also would have to appear in court – taking them away from the field and directing their time away from community safety. Law enforcement officials have expressed frustration at the administrative workload of non-safety related obligations, because it takes them away from their goal of keeping communities safe.³⁸

Allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain state driver's licenses would **improve law enforcement efficiency.**

A California police chief said officers can spend

2 to 3 hours

confirming the identity of a driver without status.

In Washington State, police spend

9 hours

arresting a driver without a valid license.

Towing and impounding vehicles when drivers are found not to have a license also can be expensive. While car owners are the ones who pay the fees, studies show that if car owners cannot or do not reclaim their cars, governments are the ones on the hook for daily storage fees.³⁹

The case also would strain court resources – for arraigning, trying, and administratively processing the case of an otherwise law-abiding person. **Court administrators and judges around the country report being overwhelmed by the volume of driving-related cases they need to process.**⁴⁰

Licensing drivers without status would help remove unnecessary cases from court dockets and free up law enforcement resources to better maintain public safety.

Who is being held in Massachusetts immigration detention?

The data show that arresting and detaining immigrants largely does not improve safety.

Most people held in immigration detention in Massachusetts have no conviction or were arrested for minor offenses, like traffic violations.⁴¹

- **Most immigrants (57 percent) being held in ICE custody in Massachusetts detention facilities had no criminal conviction.** 13 percent had minor offenses, as of April 2019.
- Of those who were arrested in Massachusetts, **54 percent either had no criminal conviction or were arrested because of a minor traffic offense** in Fiscal Year 2018, which is the most recent data available. That same year saw the highest percentage of arrests for which the most severe offense was a minor traffic violation since at least 2015.

Immigration cases can be complex and stuck in limbo for years. While immigrants await outcomes on their cases, they may continue to be held in Massachusetts facilities. Most people being held in Massachusetts had been detained for an “unknown” length of time. But – among those for whom there is data on the length of time spent in ICE detention – **57 percent had been held for longer than two years. 32 percent had been held longer than five years and 17 percent had been held longer than 10 years**, as of April 2019.⁴²



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Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – how would it affect the economy and the state's finances?

Note: Since the writing of this paper, the economic picture for the state and the world has changed dramatically. This will likely affect the near-term revenue estimates and the economic implications of the policy.



If Massachusetts allowed all drivers to get licenses, regardless of their immigration status, an estimated 41,000 to 78,000 drivers would get licensed within the first three years.

In addition to increased productivity from greater mobility, these newly licensed drivers will create direct economic benefits on car-related purchases. They will better be able to travel to good jobs and grocery stores, which helps boost the economy and generates revenue for the state.

Note: This brief examines only the direct fiscal and economic effects of allowing immigrants without status to obtain driver's licenses. It does not rely on any "multiplier effect" that occurs when spending – especially from those with low or moderate incomes – gets re-spent as it circulates through a community. The overall economic effect of this policy is likely greater than what is captured here.

How much state revenue could it generate?

Boosting undocumented workers' ability to work also boosts the amount their families contribute in taxes. Currently, **undocumented immigrants contribute about \$184.6 million in state and local taxes** (in addition to federal taxes).⁴³ Despite these contributions, they are unable to receive

benefits from programs like Social Security or Medicare because of their status.

Additional driver's licenses would also generate revenue through fees. Newly licensed Massachusetts drivers would **generate about \$6 millions of initial fee revenue** for the state within the initial three years for licenses, inspections, and other services.

Further, newly licensed drivers are likely to generate an **additional \$5 million per year in additional tax revenues** once the law is fully rolled out. Of this amount:

- \$1.2 million per year is from sales taxes on car-related purchases like tires or parts, and
- \$3.8 million per year is from motor fuel taxes from newly licensed drivers who are likely to buy cars.

Licensing undocumented immigrant drivers would **generate more state revenue:**

\$6 million
within the first three years from fees for licenses, inspections, and other services.

\$5 million
per year in taxes from motor fuel taxes and sales taxes on car-related purchases.

The above estimates are relatively conservative and do not include other revenue sources that would likely see growth – such as the motor vehicle excise tax and collections from tolls.

The methodology and sources for the above revenue numbers are documented in the Methodology section of this full report.

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How would this affect the economy?

Allowing undocumented immigrants to get around more easily would help boost their earning potential.⁴⁴ This has ripple effects that also benefit U.S. citizens and the state economy overall.

Employers are having trouble recruiting qualified workers amid a time of record-low unemployment in the state.⁴⁵ Licensing more drivers allows businesses to attract workers they cannot currently access.



83 percent of undocumented people of working age (16 years or older) are in the labor force in Massachusetts. (Some, like retirees, cannot or do not work.) More than half of those workers currently work in either the service sector or in a managerial or professional field.

More than a third of all undocumented adults in Massachusetts hold a bachelor's degree or higher.⁴⁶

The state depends on international migration to maintain its population — and workforce.⁴⁷ Economists warn that the state economy's recent slow-down is in part because of drops in international migration.⁴⁸ In light of this, **implementing policies that help its undocumented workforce access better jobs is one way to help boost the state's slowing economy.**

Undocumented women — particularly those not looking after young children — are particularly responsive to such policies.⁴⁹ Immigrants without status tend already to work at higher rates than other workers.⁵⁰ But because women tend to be paid less and tend to hold the bulk of domestic

responsibilities, they also tend to be secondary income-earners in a household.

Being able to access driver's licenses made undocumented women more able to work, according to a national study of data from 12 states and the District of Columbia that began providing drivers licenses to undocumented drivers. Overall, these women **increased their work hours by 4 percent.** They did not, however, see an increase in their wages.⁵¹

The same study found that, while undocumented women increased their work hours, it did not have a negative impact on the employment of U.S. citizen women.⁵²

Granting driver's licenses to adults without status most directly affects the 165,000 undocumented immigrants who are of driving age.⁵³ **But it also affects their family-members who have valid immigration status, who are U.S. citizens, as well as members of their community.**⁵⁴



Other benefits to the economy

Once the law is fully implemented, an estimated 8,300 to 15,700 new immigrant drivers might buy cars. **These drivers could spend about \$19.8 million on new cars.**

Drivers with licenses are better able to obtain car insurance. Once the law is fully implemented, new drivers are **likely to spend about \$62 million on new insurance policies.**

Because more people hold insurance, insurance-holders in general could also see a **decrease in their annual premiums by about \$20 — enough to buy some flowers on Mothers' Day.**

Driver's licenses for immigrants without status – methodology and notes

Revenue from initial fees

Methodology for the initial \$6 million in state revenue from driver's license fees, car registrations, and inspection fees are detailed in MassBudget's [Sharing the Road](#).

Revenue from increased motor fuel taxes

The motor fuel tax estimate was generated first with the estimate of new vehicles that newly licensed drivers might purchase.

Data from the Center for Migration Studies (CMS) of New York estimated the number of vehicles per adult in households with an undocumented adult as well as the vehicles per adult in other immigrant households. CMS provided these numbers as a statewide average. It also provided an estimate of the number of adults in households with an unauthorized immigrant adult. CMS estimates are based on U.S. Census microdata.

We assume these immigrant vehicle ownership rates would equalize if undocumented adults are able to obtain driver's licenses. Taking the difference between these rates, we are able to project how many additional vehicles these households with an undocumented adult would buy.

Rather than assume all newly eligible drivers would purchase vehicles, we applied our estimated "take-up rates" (the number of newly eligible drivers who actually would obtain licenses) to this projection. (An explanation of how we estimated these take-up rates is in MassBudget's prior report, [Sharing the Road](#).)

We took the median take-up rate from our estimated range. From this, we estimated the number of actual additional vehicles would be about 8,896 once the law is fully implemented.

We applied this number of additional vehicles as a percentage of the total vehicles currently registered in Massachusetts and assumed the fuel consumption would rise proportionately. This number is conservative because it does not capture additional fuel usage by drivers who may not buy new cars, but who will drive more frequently because they are less afraid of getting on the road.

The remainder of the methodology is indicated in the table below – applying the same percentage of the fuel that was actually taxed (the net fuel taxed) in 2017, applying a point-in-time gas price, and applying the total motor fuel tax in Massachusetts. We used a gas price of \$2.497 per gallon, which was the price listed for Feb. 12 to Feb. 18, 2020 on the Massachusetts Governor's website.⁵⁵

Licensing undocumented drivers — additional motor fuel tax revenues

Estimated new vehicles as % of total registered in MA (assume 36.5% take-up)	0.18%
Additional fuel taxed (gallons)	5,677,634
Additional spent on gas (\$2.497/gallon)	\$14,177,051
Additional motor fuel tax collected*	\$3,762,589

Sources: The Center for Migration Studies New York, 2017; Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics 2017.

*We assume most additional cars will use regular motor fuel rather than the lower-taxed LPG. Our motor fuel tax estimate includes both the 24-cent gas tax and the 2.54-cent fee for environmental and replacement costs for underground gasoline storage tanks.

Revenue from increased sales tax

The estimate of new cars was used, assuming the median take-up rate of 36.5 percent. (The methodology for estimating new cars is described above, under the "Revenue from increased motor fuel taxes" section.)

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Assuming that, once undocumented adults are able to obtain licenses, they would own cars at the same rate as other immigrant households (0.73 cars per adult) – we apply this rate to the estimated number of new vehicles to then estimate the number of people using those new cars.

We then apply this to the per capita personal consumption expenditure on motor vehicles and parts, which was obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis’ consumer spending data. In 2018, the per capita spending on cars and parts was \$1,627.

This estimate of per capita expenditure on cars and parts may not be representative of the new drivers, because many may live closer to public transit out of necessity and therefore would spend less time driving and less money on their cars. On the other hand, new access to driver’s licenses may allow drivers to access jobs and grocery stores that are further away – thereby encouraging them to drive more and spend more on their cars. These two factors may balance each other out somewhat. Because these two factors are almost impossible to account for currently, we used the best data available along with these caveats.

We then applied this number to the number of drivers who buy new cars and applied the 6.25 percent Massachusetts sales tax. Details are in the table.

Licensing undocumented drivers — additional sales tax revenues

Estimated drivers who will buy new cars	12,186
Total new car-related spending	\$19,826,210
Apply 6.25% sales tax	\$1,239,138

Sources: The Center for Migration Studies New York, 2017; U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Consumer Spending for Massachusetts, 2018.

Additional spending on cars and parts

This estimate was derived through the calculation of new revenue from motor fuel taxes. See the “Revenue from increased motor fuel taxes” section of this methodological section.

Notes

- While these briefs often use the term “undocumented immigrant”, most undocumented immigrants possess many documents that prove their identity. The term is a common shorthand that refers to immigrants without documented immigration status in the U.S. Throughout these briefs, the term is used interchangeably with the term “immigrants without status.”
- When we discuss “new cars” or “new vehicles” we are referring to cars that are newly purchased, not brand new from the manufacturer.

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