



Traffic Tech

DEPARTMENT OF
TRANSPORTATION
NHTSA TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER SERIES

DEC 15 1986

NI-1983

Volume 1.

October 1986

No. 3

How Effective is License Suspension and Revocation?

Perhaps the most effective administrative means of reducing the incidence of crashes involving DWI offenders is through driver license suspension or revocation. Because loss of the driving privilege is the ultimate means to controlling problem drivers, license suspension has a significant impact upon persons directly affected and also provides general deterrence to others who fear having their own license suspended. Research in four States (Alabama, California, North Carolina, and Washington) has documented a highly significant effect from this most basic of driver improvement actions.

The effectiveness of this action sometimes is questioned since it is argued that (a) most of the target group continue to drive even after suspension and (b) this group is overrepresented in fatal traffic crashes when compared to the general driving population. Within limits, both are true. However, of those who do drive illegally, a majority claim to drive fewer miles and more carefully than before. Furthermore, some suspended drivers don't drive all. This results in zero crashes for this group, the same as if they had been jailed for the entire term of the suspension period.

Repeat DWI offenders should not be compared to the general driving population, but only to one another. On the whole their personal lives, living habits and social mores differ markedly from that of most drivers. Most of them may be classed as alcoholics or problem drinkers. For these persons, traffic fines or violator's schools have little, if any, positive impact. However, the loss of license has been shown to result in statistically significant reductions in traffic crashes and violations, and it has been suggested that a closer relationship between driver licensing and State health and social services may result in an even greater payoff.

During the 1970's, the California DMV undertook a series of studies on the effectiveness of licensing sanctions against convicted DWIs. One 1977 study involved the comparison of two groups of drivers with multiple DWI convictions. One group received a mandated licensing suspension or revocation while the other group did not receive the mandated sanction (they avoided the action by having their prior convictions voided by the courts). Both groups received traditional jail sentences or fines. The study found that the group that had their

licenses suspended had significantly fewer subsequent crashes and violations than the non-suspended group. This pattern continued for up to four years following the term of the suspension.

In 1981, the California study was followed by a somewhat similar one in the State of Washington. The purpose of the Washington study was to evaluate the effectiveness of that State's habitual offender act toward reducing crashes and violations. This law required a five-year license revocation for habitual traffic offenders, but permitted a stay of revocation for alcohol offenders who participated in an approved treatment program. The study found that neither the alcohol treatment group nor a control group of drivers against whom no action was taken showed a significant reduction in either crashes or violations. Conversely, the group that had their driving privileges revoked showed significant reductions in both crashes and moving violation convictions. These data are consistent with the California data and support the premise that although drivers may continue to drive with suspended licenses they probably reduce the amount of their driving and perhaps drive more cautiously than before. In addition, both States reported deterrence effects resulting from license suspensions. These studies were followed, in 1981, by a North Carolina study of first offenders who were offered an education and treatment program in lieu of license suspension. For all types of crashes and violations studied, the treatment group fared significantly worse than the suspended group. Then, in 1983 and 1985, Auburn University conducted an evaluation of changes in the Alabama law that demonstrated crashes were clearly reduced when loss of the driver license was mandated for DWI first offenders. Therefore, loss of license has been found to be an effective sanction for both first offenders and repeat offenders.

In January 1986, California researchers reported a new study that addressed the effectiveness of the licensing sanction for persons who refused a chemical test under the State's implied consent law. Persons who were suspended for test refusal were found to have 72.2 percent fewer crashes during the six month suspension period than persons whose licenses were not suspended, and during the initial 18 months following the term of the suspension they continued to register 57.8 percent fewer crashes than the group that was not suspended.

It seems clear that DWI offenders view license suspension as a severe penalty. Available research also clearly shows that licensing sanctions are an effective driver control action for first time and repeat alcohol offenders, including those who refuse the chemical test, and that the resulting deterrence, both general and specific, results in significant crash reductions.

The recommendations of the California and North Carolina researchers that alcohol education and treatment be required only in addition to license suspension or revocation, rather than as an alternative to such actions, is a conclusion drawn from the overwhelming evidence presented in the described studies and in studies of the effectiveness of education and treatment programs, conducted by NHTSA during the 1970's.

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