Robert M. La Follette
School of Public Affairs
1225 Observatory Drive
Madison, WI 53706
(608) 262-3581
info@lafollette.wisc.edu

Changes to Wisconsin's Driver's License Reinstatement Policy

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Context and Issue
For those released from prison, several barriers hinder re-entry into society upon release; possession of a valid driver’s license is a seemingly small barrier that has potentially sizeable impact. For a specific population of offenders in Wisconsin, that comprise approximately 10 percent of the state’s current prison population, reacquisition of a valid driver’s license due to suspension or revocation for specific OWI-related offenses presents a substantial financial and administrative burden on the re-entry process. Despite participating in assessment, education, and treatment programs while incarcerated, these individuals must then partake in additional assessment and treatment programs upon their release, and at their own expense, in pursuit of reacquiring a valid driver’s license. We seek to analyze a proposed policy change to this process that would combine the second assessment requirement with the treatment already received in prison, in an attempt to streamline the reacquisition process and relieve the financial and administrative burden placed upon ex-offenders attempting to reintegrate into society. In doing so, we examined the literature on the effects a valid driver’s license has on employment, recidivism, and economic, personal and familial well-being, and the effects of employment on recidivism and well-being; and we speculate on how a hypothetical reduction in recidivism might pose significant reductions in criminal justice system costs.

Findings
Changes to the driver’s license reinstatement process could have potentially profound and widespread positive impacts for the population in question and society at large. Moreover, the economic implications of the proposed policy change transcend simply the financial cost saved by the individual in eliminating the second assessment requirement. Further, our analysis revealed that the majority of employment opportunities and assessment centers individuals must get to for their post-release assessment and treatment are located at extensive distances from the areas where our affected population is likely to live, presenting a significant spatial mismatch issue. While changing the locations of jobs is beyond our control, removing the burden of having to access these assessment centers for driver’s license reinstatement could have a considerable effect.

Limitations and Recommendations
Rigorous evaluation of this issue is complicated by the diverse population of interest, which fails to align with the research populations used in our analysis, and the lack of literature reviewing similar process changes of this nature. Limited implementation via a pilot program for a specific subset of the affected population could lend itself to a program evaluation or cost-benefit analysis that would better demonstrate the direct and financial impacts of streamlining Wisconsin’s driver’s license reinstatement process.