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## Overhaul proposed for license-suspension system

Number of offenders, likelihood of repeat violations at issue

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The Cincinnati Enquirer via AP

CINCINNATI -- Some judges and prosecutors say it's time to strengthen Ohio's laws governing unlicensed drivers, especially as the number of people driving without a license grows.

Almost 12 percent of Ohio drivers are under suspension, or more than one in every 10 drivers, according to a review of state data by *The Cincinnati Enquirer*. That's up 40 percent since 2000.

Ohio's percentage of suspended drivers is higher than that of Kentucky, with 6 percent, and Indiana, with 4 percent.

And the percentage of Ohio drivers under suspension has risen steadily, from 8.8 percent in 2003 to 11.6 percent in 2007, according to the Ohio Department of Public Safety.

Some say the laws needs to be strengthened to deal with repeat offenders and streamlined to reduce an unwieldy number of suspensions.

"The system we have right now is extremely broken," said state Rep. Shawn N. Webster, a Republican from Millville in southwestern Ohio. "It needs to be overhauled."

Fees, fines and court costs to reinstate a license can total hundreds of dollars, Webster said.

Judge Nadine Allen of the Hamilton County Municipal Court said her docket is clogged with license suspensions.

She said lawmakers should stop adding license suspension as a penalty for infractions. Many suspensions aren't related to dangerous driving, she said.

In Ohio, a person's license can be suspended for dozens of reasons, including failure to pay child support or a drug conviction.

Multiple suspensions are common because it is difficult to prevent offenders from driving. Drivers with suspended licenses also are more likely to cause accidents, leading to higher insurance rates, said Bob Scopatz, consultant with Data Nexis, a public-safety company in Texas.

One way to reduce the number of suspensions is to do away with the two-year mandatory suspension for driving without insurance, said Sheila Doll, supervisor of Hamilton County Municipal Court's driver's license intervention program.

"As soon as a person has insurance, they should be allowed to get back behind the wheel," she said.

Another issue: Although a common reason for a license suspension is not having insurance, the state doesn't require proof of insurance when people renew their plates.

Butler County Prosecutor Robin Piper said repeat offenders should face longer prison terms. He said too many unlicensed drivers defy judges' orders and get behind the wheel.

"I don't like knee-jerk reactions, asking for new laws every time something happens," Piper said. "But driving under suspension in my mind is different."

A Hamilton County judge calling for change noted that many suspensions aren't related to dangerous driving.

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