



Seat Belt, DWI, and Other Traffic Violations Among Recent Immigrants in Florida and Tennessee

The rapidly changing racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population is important to traffic safety specialists because involvement in fatal traffic crashes varies across racial and ethnic groups. Some research suggests that certain minority groups may be overrepresented in motor vehicle crashes because recent immigrants may lack an understanding of traffic laws and regulations, especially among less acculturated immigrants coming from countries where traffic laws are not well enforced. Other research suggests just the opposite: that as immigrants become more acculturated, they may be at greater risk.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration examined all 50 States to identify those whose traffic safety databases contain residency status. Of the four States identified, driver history databases in Florida and Tennessee were analyzed for four traffic safety violations—seat belt non-use, DWI, speeding, and failure to obey traffic signals or signs—for drivers of different immigrant status. This analysis provides objective information about certain traffic safety behaviors and violations among recent and long-time immigrants.

Driver Record Data

The Florida Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) maintains a record of the birth date and legal presence code that identifies the type of document the applicant presented when applying for a driver's license. The Florida DMV has an indicator on each driver's record, indicating whether the applicant provided a legal presence document showing that he or she is in the country for a limited period. Florida officials separated the drivers' residency status into three categories: U.S. citizens, resident aliens, and non-resident aliens. U.S. citizens include drivers who were born in the United States or who are naturalized citizens. Resident aliens have a "green card," whereas non-resident aliens do not. Florida officials provided a stratified random sample of 286,746 driver records covering 6 years from 2003–2009.

The Tennessee Department of Safety data managers provided the complete set of 5.6 million persons in their database during the last 10 years. Tennessee used four residency categories: temporary resident aliens, permanent resident aliens, naturalized U.S. citizens (who were previously aliens), and

U.S. born citizens. Both State databases contained driver age, gender, race, ethnicity, and ZIP code of residence.

Findings

Overall, drivers who were citizens were more likely to be cited for one of the four traffic violations than those who were not citizens or who had arrived in the country more recently. The graphs show average annual violations for Florida and Tennessee. Each State has a unique system for processing and storing driver record data; therefore, violation rates are not comparable across the two States.

Of the four violations, there were substantially more speeding violations in both States than the other three violations. DWI violations were the lowest of the four violations in both

Figure 1. Average Annual Violations per 1,000 Drivers by Residency Status in Florida (2003–2009)

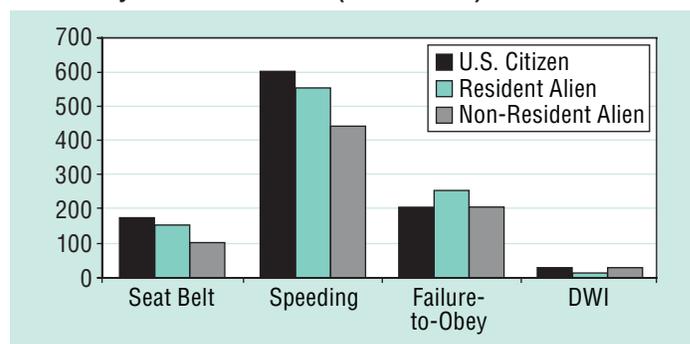
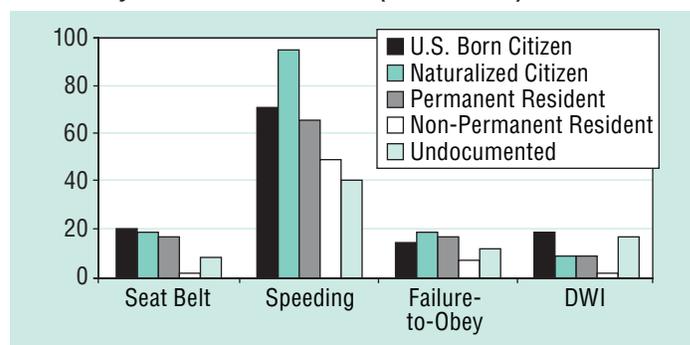


Figure 2. Average Annual Violations per 1,000 Drivers by Residency Status in Tennessee (2000–2010)



States. Males in each State had significantly higher violation rates than females, and young drivers under the age of 21 were cited more often for traffic violations than older drivers regardless of residency status.

The more U.S. driving experience a driver had, the higher their traffic citation rate. U.S. citizens and long-time residents received significantly more seat belt, speeding, and failure-to-obey traffic signs or signals violations than drivers with a more recent residency status. There were variations depending on the type of violation, the driver’s racial and ethnic group, and the State.

Asian/Pacific Islanders (PIs) were significantly less involved than other racial and ethnic groups in seat belt or DWI violations, but they were among the groups more involved in speeding and failure-to-obey violations. White and American Indian drivers were significantly less involved in failure-to-obey citations than drivers of any other group. Recent Hispanic immigrants in Florida were more likely to be arrested for DWI than more established immigrants, but this was not the case for recent Hispanic immigrants in Tennessee who had the lowest rates there.

Time to First Traffic Safety Violation

Survival analyses evaluated which traffic violations the different groups of newly licensed drivers were likely to commit first. Among the four traffic violations, speeding was more likely to be the first one to occur as shown in the graphs to the right. In both Florida and Tennessee, 1 percent of all drivers received a speeding violation within 3 months of licensure, independent of residency status. The three other traffic violations analyzed in this study appeared later in the driving histories. Male drivers and Whites had a shorter time from licensure to a DWI violation than other drivers. Hispanic non-resident aliens had the shortest time from licensure to a DWI arrest in Florida while resident aliens had the longest. In Tennessee, non-permanent residents showed the longest time to any of the four violations.

Summary and Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that immigrants of different groups and from different States have different involvements with certain traffic violations.

- The hypothesis that recent immigrants may be cited for any traffic violation at a higher rate than more established drivers was not supported, with the exception of DWI among recent Hispanics in Florida.

- Using residency status as a proxy for “time since immigration,” there is evidence that recent immigrants might be less likely to be involved in seat belt and speeding violations.
- Recent immigrants in Florida had more DWI arrests than more established resident drivers, but fewer than White drivers in Florida.
- Immigrant status played a different role in the likelihood of traffic violations, depending on the traffic violation considered, the racial and ethnic group, and the driver’s State of residence.

Figure 3. Survival Analysis—Number of Weeks Until 1 Percent of Drivers Have Incurred a Traffic Violation, by Residency Status in Florida

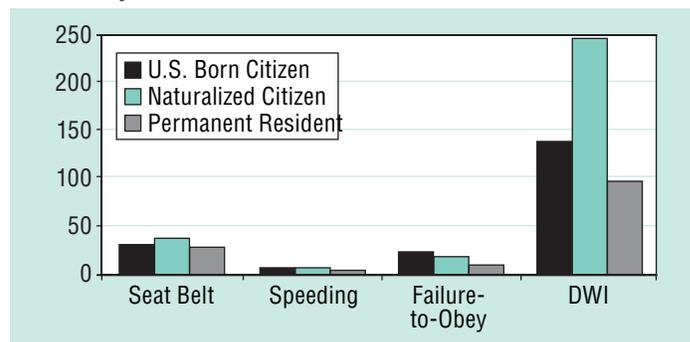
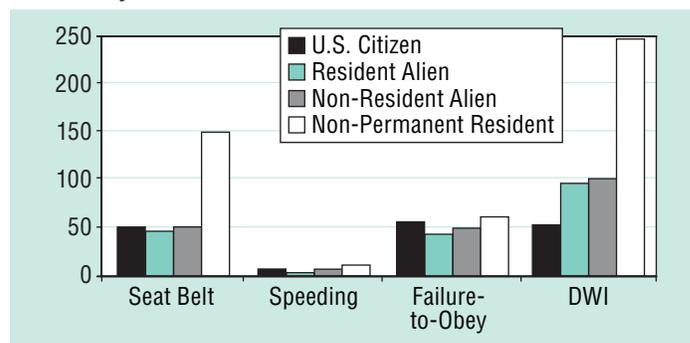


Figure 4. Survival Analysis—Number of Weeks Until 1 Percent of Drivers Have Incurred a Traffic Violation, by Residency Status in Tennessee



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