

rural new york minute

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Driver's Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants: Policy Considerations for New York State

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What is the issue?

On September 21, Governor Spitzer announced that New York State will become the eighth state to provide access to driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. This issue has generated a significant amount of controversy. The Spitzer administration cited public safety (the DMV estimates that tens of thousands of unlicensed and uninsured drivers are currently on New York's roads), and lower auto insurance rates for all drivers as two key reasons for this measure. Those opposed to the Governor's actions cite concerns about national security – a state driver's license provides undocumented individuals an official form of identification, as well as granting privileges to persons who have entered the country illegally.

How do immigrant farmworkers feel about this issue?

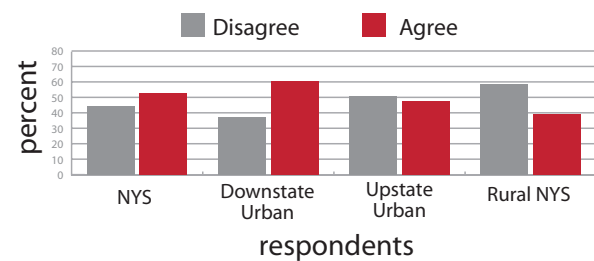
The driver's license issue is particularly important to immigrant farmworkers in NYS who live in rural areas and often lack access to transportation. It is estimated that there are between 50,000 and 80,000 farmworkers in NYS, many of whom are undocumented immigrants. As part of a larger research project, the Cornell Farmworker Program conducted a series of interviews with immigrant farmworkers about access to driver's licenses in NYS. Immigrant farmworkers felt that having a driver's license would allow individuals to more fully participate in community life, access needed goods and services, and avoid the negative effects of social isolation. Unlicensed workers must often rely heavily on employers or friends for transportation, arrangements which are often inconsistent and unreliable.

How do New Yorkers feel about this issue?

To gain a deeper understanding of how New Yorkers feel about this issue, the Cornell Farmworker Program added a question on the 2007 Empire State Poll where respondents were read the following statement and question: "Currently, undocumented immigrants are not allowed to apply for a driver's license in New York State. As an alternative, some states offer an "immigrant driving document" for undocumented immigrants which requires them to pass a written and road test. Do you think that undocumented immigrants in NYS should be allowed to apply for a similar immigrant driving document?" New Yorkers differ significantly in how they feel about this issue, depending on what part of the state they live in (see Figure 1).

A slight majority of New Yorkers (53%) were in favor of allowing undocumented immigrants the opportunity to apply for a document similar to a driver's license, while 44% were opposed. Downstate urban respondents were the most supportive, while rural New Yorkers were the least supportive (60% to 38%, respectively). Upstate urban respondents fell in the middle, with approximately 48% agreeing with the idea. It is interesting to note that while access to transportation is a significant issue in rural areas across the state, rural New Yorkers were much more likely to oppose granting undocumented immigrants access to licenses. This finding may reflect the difference

Figure 1: Should undocumented immigrants in NYS be allowed to apply for a document similar to a driver's license?



Source: February 2007 Empire State Poll & Rural Survey, Survey Research Institute, Cornell Farmworker Program, & CaRDI, Cornell University.

*numbers do not add to 100% because of a "do not know" response not shown here.

in rural New Yorker's views about immigrants and immigration in general, rather than simply the issue of driver's licenses. Rural New Yorkers may also see immigration as an exclusively urban issue, not realizing that undocumented immigrants also settle in rural areas.

What are some of the policy implications?

Those who support providing undocumented immigrants access to licenses suggest that such measures increase public safety. Most immigrants who have received licenses through immigrant licensing programs in other states have purchased and maintained auto insurance policies, and have passed a road test and an eye examination. Licenses would ensure that immigrants who drive would do so legally and safely—a benefit to all New York State residents. Those in opposition to such measures point to concerns about domestic security issues, as well as their unease in granting privileges (versus rights) to individuals who have entered the country illegally.

Starting in December 2007, the NYS Department of Motor Vehicles will accept a current foreign passport as proof of identity. The administration argued that this change will increase public safety, lower insurance rates for all drivers, increase security, and strengthen the "one driver/one license" rule. The Governor has delayed a decision regarding New York's compliance with the Real ID Act of 2005, federal legislation which mandates a federal driver's license. Critics of this act suggest that it will create a two-tier system which would identify immigrants. However, rejecting the Real ID Act may potentially cause New York licenses to no longer be valid forms of federal identification. The dialogue around providing access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants at both the state and federal level will likely continue in the public policy arena for some time. ♦

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