

How A Traffic Fine Can Lead To Jail Time In California

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In California, failure to pay traffic fines can lead to suspension or loss of license, and even jail time for some.
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Lots of people pay traffic fines, but not everyone is affected the same way. According to a new report from the [Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights](#) of the San Francisco Bay Area, traffic fines in California have an outsize effect on low-income drivers and people of color. And those **consequences** are not just **monetary**. Unpaid tickets can result in additional fines. Failure to pay those fines can lead to **suspension** or loss of license, and even jail time for some if they continue to drive without a license.

Elisa Della-Piana, the legal director for the LCCR, said the organization, which provides civil legal aid for low-income residents and people of color, started digging into these data after clients said they had lost their licenses because they couldn't pay a ticket. Since almost 80 percent of Californians drive to work, the inability to pay a traffic fine is a threat to many people's livelihoods. "And there was no pathway in California to get that license back unless people could pay the full fine amount," Della-Piana said. "So we started working for statewide change."

California uses traffic fines as a revenue source, and those fines are the steepest in the country, according to the report. The base fine for running a red light is \$100, but late fees and other **add-ons** can make that single ticket eventually cost more than \$800. And people are not issued tickets for driving violations only. They can also be ticketed and have their licenses suspended for things like **jaywalking** or **loitering**. As a result, over 4 million California drivers were without a license in 2015.

Because of disparities in policing, the money issues wind up affecting minorities disproportionately. In cities like Fresno, San Diego and Sacramento, studies indicate that black and Latino drivers are more likely to get pulled over than white drivers. And in nine counties in the Bay Area, data have shown that black and Latino drivers are far more likely than the general population to end up in county jail as the result of a driving or other traffic offense.

Della-Piana sees parallels between what's going on in California and the policing situation in Ferguson, Mo. "That's a city that was making its money by fining its primarily black residents," Della-Piana said. "We like to think in California that we're doing things differently, but our report shows that in nine Bay Area counties, black people are four to 16 times more likely to be booked into county jails, to be the ones arrested, for a charge that's related to failure to pay. ... I think we have to acknowledge that racial bias in policing is a problem everywhere."

Until April of this year, California had a traffic amnesty program that allowed low-income people to pay fines that were **proportional** to their salaries. The state found that when fines were lower, more revenue was generated because people were able to pay incrementally, rather than in one giant lump sum. Now that the program has expired, the state will have to decide how to move forward.

"There will still be racial disparities in initial traffic stops that are really significant," Della-Piana said. "But if we take away the second part where people lose their licenses, where people get arrested, then we will at least have stopped the compounding of the racial disparity problem."