



Suppose your driving record got bad enough to come to the attention of your state's driver licensing division. What could the state do to induce you to improve? Suspend your license? Send you a warning letter? The National Safety Council has published a research report written by Noel Kaestner and Laurie Speight, researchers for the Oregon Traffic Safety Commission, that provides some surprising answers.

They selected a study group of 960 drivers who were eligible for first-time license suspension. The drivers were divided into five groups. Group one received letters informing them they were up for license suspension, but could avoid trouble if they would take the Defensive Driving Course. Group two received probationary licenses that allowed them to drive only during specified periods for 30 days. Group three were sent warning letters. Group four received a 30 day license suspension. Group five served as the control group—they were not contacted in any way.

During the year following the initial phase, the driving records of all subjects were carefully monitored for violations and culpable accidents. Which group do you think did the best at avoiding violations and accidents?

The Defensive Driving Course group and the group that received probationary licenses tied for the number one spot with approximately 57 percent of each group completing a full year without a driving mishap. By comparison, only 49 percent of the control group made it through a full year without trouble. The suspension group and the warning letter group did even worse with 44 and 41 percent records respectively.

The researchers came up with a number of conclusions based on their study.

“Traditional suspension alone is not effective either in reducing the number of drivers who have moving violations or chargeable accidents,” and “a last chance warning letter is no more effective than the traditional discretionary suspension employed in the Oregon driver improvement program.”

The researchers went on to recommend an increased use of both probationary licenses and the Defensive Driving Course as being “effective in significantly reducing driving failures.” The Defensive Driving Course was even effective, they said, for drivers with particularly bad prior records.

In spite of the ineffectiveness of suspension, the researchers did not advocate abandoning it altogether. They speculated that the effectiveness of the other measures may have been due, at least in part, to the threat of suspension as an alternative. They recommended retaining license suspension as “the ultimate weapon to combat the effects of negligent driving.”



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