

THE ID DIVIDE: HOW BARRIERS TO ID IMPACT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND AFFECT US ALL

Executive Summary

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**NO ID
NO ENTRY**



movement advancement project ▶

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Movement Advancement Project

MAP's mission is to provide independent and rigorous research, insight, and communications that help speed equality and opportunity for all people. MAP works to ensure that all people have a fair chance to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, take care of the ones they love, be safe in their communities, and participate in civic life. For more information, visit www.mapresearch.org.

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Learn more about identity documents by reading MAP's full report:

THE ID DIVIDE: HOW BARRIERS TO ID IMPACT DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES AND AFFECT US ALL

<http://www.mapresearch.org/id-documents-report>



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Identity documents (IDs), like driver’s licenses or birth certificates, are so commonplace in our everyday life that many people don’t notice how important they are. Identity documents are vital keys necessary to unlock the doors to everything from driving a car and getting a library card to opening a bank account, getting a job, and, increasingly, voting.

Despite the clear importance of IDs, there are key system-level failures that make it too difficult for many people to get and maintain accurate identity documents. This in turn leads to severe, yet easily avoidable, harms for many people of all backgrounds—though these harms often impact different communities in different ways.

Importantly, however, these systems-level failures and roadblocks can be fixed. Systems-level solutions can improve access to IDs and to all aspects of life.

Key System Failures Create Roadblocks to Accurate ID

Despite the importance of IDs, it is not always straightforward, simple, or affordable to get or update an ID. Many people have certainly experienced the inconvenience of getting or updating their IDs. But there are substantial obstacles (above and beyond inconvenience) to getting or updating ID that create severe problems for many people across the country, which result in too many people lacking these important documents. These obstacles—which frequently overlap with and exacerbate each other—include:



Burdensome, and often circular, documentation requirements. Getting or updating an ID typically requires extensive paperwork or documentation, such as court orders, utility bills, medical records, or proof of citizenship or residency. These requirements are often circular, requiring one form of ID (like a birth certificate) to get another (like a driver’s license). But not everyone has equal access to these essential documents or to the resources required to obtain them.



Needlessly expensive. Getting or updating an ID typically costs money, and these fees vary widely across states. For example, the cost of a new driver’s license ranges from \$15 to \$89 (an average of nearly \$38, or over four hours of work at state minimum wage), and the cost of ordering a

certified copy of a birth certificate online ranges from \$31 to \$78 (an average of \$51, or over five hours of work at state minimum wage). Even at the lower end, these financial costs can create significant obstacles for low-income people, especially given the way that identity documents frequently build on one another (e.g., needing a copy of a birth certificate to get a driver’s license) and lead to snowballing costs.



Limited availability of ID services. It takes time to get or update an ID: time to obtain the necessary paperwork and documentation, time to travel to and from the ID issuing location, and time spent waiting. This is especially true for people who live in areas with fewer ID-issuing locations and who therefore may have to travel further for service or in places that have very limited hours, which may require taking time off work. Coupled with complex documentation requirements or potentially discriminatory experiences—if a person doesn’t have all the required papers or is denied service and must come back to try again—the cost of time and travel can quickly escalate from an obstacle to an outright barrier to getting an ID.



Confusing patchwork of policies. Some of the most essential IDs—driver’s licenses and birth certificates—are issued by state governments. This means that policies about these vital IDs—what documentation is required, the costs imposed, the hours and locations available, formal nondiscrimination policies, staff training, and more—all vary widely from one state to the next. This patchwork is confusing and can be a challenge to navigate, especially if a person has moved or needs to obtain documentation (such as an original birth certificate) from a state other than where they are currently living. This also means that a person might be able to, for example, update their driver’s license in the state where they currently live, but not be able to update their birth certificate from their home state, leading to mismatched documents that can cause further obstacles.



Discrimination and prejudice. The United States has a long history of discrimination, both by individuals and by the law, including in ways that impact ID access. Legal segregation, for example, prevented many Black Americans from accessing hospitals, leading to higher likelihood of at-home births and, as a result, lower likelihood of receiving an official birth certificate. Today, laws and policies vary widely in terms of, for example,

allowing transgender people to update the name and gender marker on their ID or in allowing undocumented people to get a driver's license. Even beyond government policies, individuals may experience hostility or discrimination by agency staff when seeking to get or update their identity documents. Furthermore, a lack of ID can lead to increased interactions with law enforcement, and these (often discriminatory) interactions can in turn exacerbate obstacles to ID, such as through license suspensions. Whether in official policies or personal interactions, discrimination and prejudice create significant obstacles to accessing IDs.

Lack of ID Limits Full and Equal Participation in Life

Our society's broad reliance on IDs means that when people cannot obtain an accurate ID, it can result in serious harm across many parts of life, from the day-to-day activities like driving or banking, to cornerstone aspects of participating in democracy and society like voting or registering for school. These harms include:



Can't secure basic needs, from employment to housing to health care. When submitting a job or rental application, applying for housing or shelter, receiving medical care or picking up a prescription, and much more, IDs are required for even the most basic of necessities. This means, for example, that a transgender person whose ID does not match their name or gender may be refused medical care or insurance coverage. IDs are also often necessary to access or maintain employment: roughly 84% of workers ages 16 and up drive to work, which legally requires a valid driver's license.¹ As a result, a lack of ID or accurate ID means people may not be able to access even basic needs such as these.



Can't access essential services, from banking and schools to disaster relief and public transportation. ID is often required to open a bank account, get a public transportation pass, or enroll in public programs like schools, benefits, or get a library card. All of these enable people to go about their daily life—and not having an ID can make things more difficult, if not impossible. For example, lifeline programs—such as Social Security, emergency or disaster assistance, food stamps, rental assistance, and more—all also require identification. Obstacles to ID can therefore prevent people from accessing important services and needed benefits.



Can't participate in everyday life, from traveling to picking up children from school and much more. IDs are so frequently used throughout everyday life that it is almost easy to overlook their use. IDs are needed to buy alcohol, to see certain movies, to use a credit card, and to pick up packages at the post office or open a P.O. box. IDs provide access to special services or benefits, such as discounted admission for local residents to an art museum or community theater. IDs are also necessary for travel and leisure, such as for boarding a plane, renting a car or hotel room, or applying for sport licenses such as for fishing. IDs are often required for many family responsibilities, such as picking up children from school or childcare. Rare are the parts of everyday life where an ID is not at least sometimes needed.



Can't participate in civic life, from voting to court services to running for office. IDs are required for many aspects of civic life and responsibilities, including registering to vote and, in many states, casting a ballot, jury duty, court services, filing petitions, getting a permit for an assembly or protest, and more. Obstacles to ID undermine the right to participate in these core civil rights and aspects of civic life.



Causes harm to communities and public safety. Given the broad reliance on IDs in our society, when people cannot obtain accurate identity documents, it causes harm to both the individual and the broader community. For example, when COVID-19 vaccines first became available, many locations required people to show an ID to get the vaccine, and in some cases even for COVID testing. But this jeopardizes both the health of individuals without ID or accurate ID, as well as the health and safety of the broader community given the contagious nature of the virus. In another example, if a person cannot get a driver's license due to the financial costs or circular documentation requirements, then they may be forced to drive without a license so they can still get to work and care for their families. This puts both them and those around them at risk without the safety training and knowledge that getting a license requires.

Additionally, a lack of ID or accurate ID can have criminal consequences, such as charging transgender people with fraud when their identities are not reflected by their IDs or imprisoning people who drive without a valid license, causing shockwaves of harm and disruption to their families and broader communities. And, because

¹ American Community Survey (ACS). "Table S0801: Commuting Characteristics by Sex." 2020 5-Year Estimates.

obstacles to ID disproportionately impact certain communities, as discussed in the next section, this criminalization of a lack of ID can even further exacerbate the already existing racial, economic, and other disparities in the American criminal legal system—even further undermining public safety and public good.

Obstacles to Accurate ID Impact Different Communities in Different Ways

Obstacles to accurate ID and the harms from not having accurate ID affect everyone, but they do not affect everyone in the same ways. Specific communities—such as people of color, transgender people, immigrants, low-income people, formerly incarcerated people, and more—are less likely to have valid identity documents and are disproportionately impacted by these obstacles and their resultant harms, and often in different ways. For example, while the financial cost of IDs is an obstacle for many people across the country, this is particularly true for low-income people. And the harms to civic life, such as the constitutional right to vote, are particularly salient for people of color: research clearly shows that people of color are disproportionately harmed by strict ID requirements for voting.²

That the obstacles and harms do not fall equally on everyone illustrates how access to IDs continues to entrench inequality and unequal access to opportunity in American life, and especially for communities who often already face such exclusion in many other areas of life.

Recommendations

Structural failures create roadblocks to IDs for so many people, causing widespread yet avoidable harm. This illustrates how vital it is that policymakers, advocates, and communities work to redress these system failures, reduce obstacles to ID, minimize harms, and improve opportunities for everyone. Importantly, the recommendations emphasized here highlight the importance of collaborative, coalitional efforts to improve identity document policies for all affected, not only one obstacle or impacted community at a time.

One broad recommendation is to rigorously examine when and whether IDs are actually necessary to access many basic needs, essential services, and aspects of everyday life or civic life. In instances when ID is nonetheless required, it is important to have clearly defined and clearly communicated alternative options ready for when people inevitably do not have an ID or accurate ID.

BY THE NUMBERS: Who lacks a valid, accurate driver's license?

8% of white people	21% of Black people
12% of all U.S. adults	23% of Hispanic people
21% of people ages 70+	68% of transgender people

Sources: American National Election Studies 2020; U.S. Transgender Survey 2015; Sivak and Schoettle 2014.

Specific recommendations, detailed later in this report, include taking targeted steps to redress each of the major system failures, such as reducing the burdensome paperwork and circular logic that often means a person must already have an ID to get an ID. Making requirements simpler not only improves access to IDs for everyone, but especially helps those who currently lack an ID or accurate ID break out of the cycle of harm caused by not having an ID, yet not being able to get one. Similarly, reducing the needlessly high financial costs (whether across the board or through waivers and targeted programs) and improving the availability of ID-issuing services (whether through expanded locations and hours or expanded online services or still other opportunities) again expands access for everyone, and especially for those with limited means, who live in rural or remote areas, and more.

Conclusion

Because IDs are vital keys that unlock doors to nearly every part of life, there are at least two paths forward to ensure equal access and opportunity to participate in daily life, our democracy, and our society. One is to make sure everyone has or can access a key, while the other is to remove the doors themselves whenever possible. While this report focuses on improving access to IDs, the strategies and recommendations outlined can also be part of a strategy focused on thinking critically about whether, when, and for what IDs ought to be required.

Identity documents can serve important functions, but they should not and must not be an obstacle to accessing basic needs and services or participating in civic and daily life. This report shows there are clear, achievable paths forward for promoting public safety and good governance while still ensuring the rights of people to move freely, have their needs met, and have an equal opportunity to participate in civic and everyday life.

² Matt Barreto, Stephen Nuño, Gabriel Sanchez, and Hannah Walker. 2019. "The Racial Implications of Voter Identification Laws in America." *American Politics Research* 47(2), 238–249. DOI: 10.1177/1532673X18810012.



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