

**TEENS,  
TICKETS  
AND AVOIDING  
TROUBLE**

**What young drivers and parents should  
know about driver's license sanctions  
in Connecticut.**

**By**

**Christopher DeMatteo**

## **PREFACE**

The following is a free guide for young drivers and their parents. It is intended to provide basic information about the types of offenses that can trigger driver's license suspensions. The state enacted these punishments to deter what it considers unsafe activity. Contrary to that objective, the suspension consequences are not widely known or publicized. Quite often (especially for alcohol possession), a person pays a ticket and is surprised when he or she receives a suspension notice from the Department of Motor Vehicles.

As an attorney, I think it is imperative that citizens know the laws that are passed by their elected representatives and which they are expected to follow. I also think it is important to know how the legal process works and what you can do if you do find yourself up against the law.

This guide is not a substitute for legal advice. Hopefully you will not need it. If you do though, you should call an attorney (preferably me) to discuss your case.

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## INTRODUCTION TO DRIVER'S LICENSE SUSPENSIONS

*"God giveth, and the DMV taketh away. You mustn't f--- with the Department of Motor Vehicles. We can make your life a living hell."*

*-License to Drive<sup>1</sup>*

Earning a driver's license<sup>2</sup> is a rite of passage for most young people. Receiving a ticket is another. While it takes time and effort to obtain a license, it can take just one mistake to lose it.

Motor vehicle offenses can fall within all offense classifications. Some are felonies or misdemeanors, which are criminal offenses and carry potential jail sentences and fines as well as a criminal conviction. Most are non-criminal, either infractions or violations. They carry the risk of fines and also the potential for driver's license suspensions. Suspensions can be the direct results of a conviction or can be indirectly caused by points or retraining obligations.

Suspensions are devastating for a few reasons. One is that you cannot drive. Another is that a suspension is on your driving history which can cause problems with insurance or licensing in the future.

Note that people who have out-of-state driver's licenses will have their Connecticut driving privileges revoked even though their licenses will not be suspended (although it may be possible, depending on the state, for the state that issued the license to suspend it). Individuals who do not yet have a driver's license will be delayed from obtaining them if they are convicted of a suspendable offense.

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<sup>1</sup> *License to Drive*. Dir. Greg Beeman. Perf. Corey Haim, Corey Feldman, Heather Graham. Twentieth Century Fox, 1988. Film. This vehicle for the "Coreys" should be considered a classic.

<sup>2</sup> Connecticut uses the term Operator's License in statutes and regulations. For our purposes, we are using the colloquial "Driver's License."

## **CRIMINAL MOTOR VEHICLE OFFENSES THAT TRIGGER SUSPENSIONS FOR ANY AGE DRIVER**

### **O.U.I. / DRUNK (OR HIGH) DRIVING**

It is illegal to operate a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. In addition to the criminal penalties (fines, jail and a suspension imposed by the court), a person convicted of OUI/DUI<sup>3</sup> also faces administrative driver's license suspensions. In addition, the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles may suspend the license of a person who fails or refuses a blood alcohol test independent of the criminal case. This is called a *per se* suspension. If your license has been suspended, I may be able to help you challenge a *per se* suspension in a hearing before an officer of DMV. I know what facts to bring to the hearing which may help you keep your license. In addition, a person whose license is suspended may be eligible for a Special Operator's Permit from the DMV which would allow you to continue to drive to work or school. Connecticut takes the DUI laws seriously, and so should you. If you have made the mistake of driving while under the influence, let me help you get back on the road. Unlike other motor vehicle crimes that carry suspension possibility, a conviction for DUI is not required for the suspension to take effect.

### **RECKLESS DRIVING, EVADING AND OTHER MOTOR VEHICLE CRIMES**

Convictions for sections of the following criminal offenses trigger automatic license suspensions: Reckless Driving, Evading Responsibility, Operating Under Suspension, Eluding (failure to stop when ordered to by a police officer), Negligent Homicide With a Motor Vehicle, Possessing a Fake ID or Altered License, Committing Perjury or Making a False Statement in DMV matters.

Motor vehicle crimes are almost always handled in criminal court, even when the driver is a juvenile and would be subject to juvenile court for other criminal offenses.

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<sup>3</sup> Again, the offense is officially called Operation While Under the Influence. DUI (as well as DWI or OWI) is the more colloquial abbreviation.

## NON-CRIMINAL MOTOR VEHICLE VIOLATIONS (TICKETS) THAT TRIGGER SUSPENSIONS FOR PEOPLE UNDER THE AGE OF 18.

*"I'm up and down the Westway, in and out the lights  
What a great traffic system, it's so bright  
I can't think of a better way to spend the night  
Than speeding around underneath the yellow lights"*  
-The Clash, "London's Burning"<sup>4</sup>

Driving is a part of teenage life. It also terrifies adults and is therefore heavily regulated. Young people face enhanced penalties, such as automatic suspensions, for many motor vehicle offenses.

### **Passenger/Curfew Restriction Violations**

The most significant restriction is the passenger restriction: for the first year of having a license, sixteen and seventeen year-old drivers are limited in the ability to carry passengers. There are exceptions but basically teenage drivers cannot drive other young people for a year. They can also not drive during certain times. There are exceptions for work and school activities. Violation of these restrictions triggers a license suspension.

### **Speeding**

Speeding does not usually cause a license suspension but it can. Drivers under the age of 18 are subject to suspensions for going more than 20 miles per hour over the speed limit. A court can also recommend that DMV suspend any driver's license after entering a conviction for speeding . Four speeding suspensions (regardless of the point total or age of the driver) cause an automatic suspension.

### **Cell phone/Handheld Electronic Devices**

Drivers under the age of 18 automatically receive license suspensions for any cell phone violation.

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<sup>4</sup> The Clash. "London's Burning." *The Clash*, CBS, 1977.

## **ALCOHOL AND MARIJUANA POSSESSION**

### Underage Possession of Alcohol

Subject to a few limited exceptions, people under the age of 21 are not allowed to possess alcoholic beverages in Connecticut (or in any other state). Consumption is not required. A conviction for Possession of Alcohol By a Minor triggers a driver's license suspension even if the possession is not in a car or anywhere near a road.

### Possession of Marijuana

While possession of certain, personal quantities of cannabis is no longer a criminal offense for adults, minors in possession (persons younger than 21 years old) face suspensions of drivers' licenses and privileges in much the same way as if they were in possession of alcohol underage.

## **STOPPING LICENSES SUSPENSIONS AFTER THEY ARE ISSUED**

Often a person does not find out about the driver's license suspension for a non-criminal offense until a suspension notice from DMV arrives after the ticket is paid. It actually might not be too late to reopen the case and stop the suspension. To do so, one must file a motion to reopen in the proper court. If granted, the case will go back to the beginning. From that point, a defendant will have the opportunity to resolve the case in a manner that does not result in a license suspension.

## **FAILURE TO PAY OR PLEAD**

Not answering, paying or appearing for a scheduled court date could lead to a 14-140 administrative license suspension. The license cannot be restored until the ticket is re-opened and cleared. Operating under the suspension is a misdemeanor. Additionally, failing to pay, plead or appear could be charged as a stand-alone misdemeanor.

## **POINTS AND OPERATOR RETRAINING**

Like many states, Connecticut has a points system for motor vehicle offenses. DMV has the administrative authority to assess points on a person's license or operating privileges. Speeding for example, is one point. A DUI is three points. Passing a stopped school bus is four. Vehicular homicide and speeding in a school bus is five. There are many other point offenses. This list is not exhaustive.

DMV may suspend your license when your points total hits or exceeds ten. DMV is supposed to send you a warning letter when you reach six points. Each point assessment remains on the record for twenty-four months, meaning that each individual offense's points are erased after two years. For instance, if you received three two point violations over three years, only the points assessed in the preceding twenty-four months would count.

If DMV does suspend your license for points, you have a right to an administrative hearing to challenge the suspension.

In addition to points, DMV has operator retraining requirements. For drivers under the age of 25, DMV may require retraining ("traffic school") if a driver picks up two moving or suspension convictions. For drivers 25 and older, it is three such violations. Not all offenses are subject to this requirement. Retraining is also not dependent on point totals.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU OR YOUR CHILD RECEIVES A TICKET

Here is a quick guide for what to do when your teenage daughter or son receives a ticket.

1. Determine if it is a ticket or a summons. A summons looks like a ticket but it is really an order to appear in court. Summons can be issued for both infractions (not crimes) and misdemeanors (crimes). A summons should have a court date and location. Believe it or not I have had clients who thought a summons was a ticket and did not appear in court. Reckless Driving for instance is a misdemeanor but is often issued on a summons rather than through a custodial arrest.
2. Be mindful of the Return Date. You must pay or plead Not Guilty by the Return Date. This can be done online. Failure to pay or plead could lead to an administrative driver's license suspension (14-140) or an actual criminal charge of Failure to Respond to Infraction. The same thing could happen if you fail to appear in court when ordered to do so.
3. See what the charges are. If it's a motor vehicle violation, the statute would begin with a 14. Alcohol and marijuana violations start with 30 and 21a respectively. Look up the statute and see what the penalties are.
4. Contact an attorney. Although a ticket might seem minor, this step is important because suspension requirements are not always clear and can also depend on other facts.
5. Respond to the ticket by the Return Date.

## **ABOUT CHRISTOPHER DEMATTEO**

Chris DeMatteo is a trial and appellate lawyer with more than fifteen years of Connecticut courtroom experience, focusing on criminal defense, personal injury, employment, and civil litigation. He grew up in New Haven, attended Xavier High School in Middletown, and earned his bachelor's degree from Boston College and his law degree from Marquette University in Milwaukee. He began his career at a personal injury firm in Bristol, then built and ran his own solo practice for nearly ten years. He went on to serve as Senior Associate at one of Connecticut's top trial firms before joining Willinger, Willinger & Bucci as Counsel in 2026.

In his career, Chris has represented many young clients in criminal, delinquency, motor vehicle, drug and alcohol violations, and talked many parents off the ledge following a ticket or arrest.

Chris is an avid reader and occasional writer. He has written several opinion pieces that have been published online and in print. He hopes to eventually write legal thrillers but is now just writing legal briefs. He lives in Fairfield County with his wife, who is also an attorney, and their young daughter, who is not an attorney but argues like one.

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