

Ignition Interlock Devices: Starting Your Engine Sober

By Anne Teigen

Ignition interlocks can help decrease the number of drunken drivers.

Devices are more accurate and less susceptible to tampering.

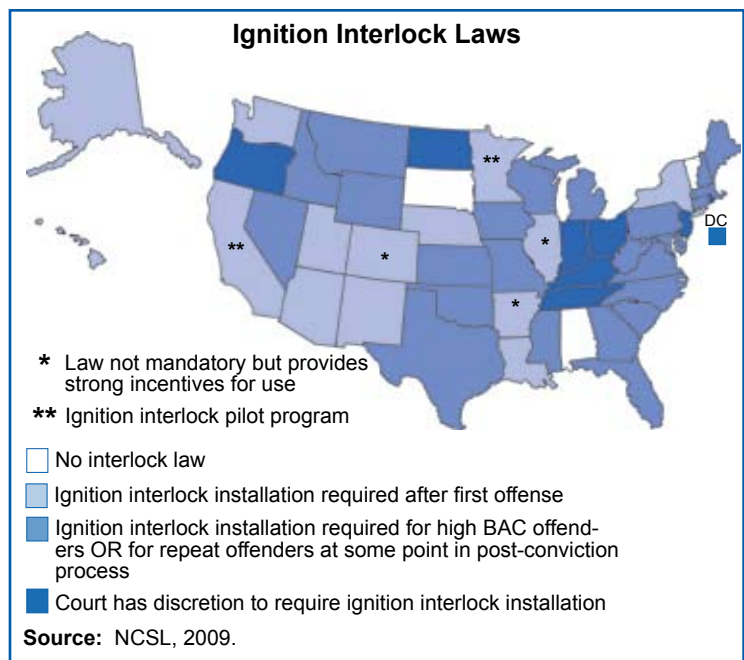
State ignition interlock laws vary.

Alcohol-impaired driving fatalities still account for 32 percent of all U.S. traffic deaths. An estimated 11,700 people were killed in alcohol-impaired crashes in 2008, an approximate average of one fatality every 45 minutes. Impaired driving remains a significant public safety issue, and legislators are considering such tools as ignition interlock technology to decrease the number of drunken drivers.

Ignition interlock devices are installed in motor vehicles to prevent them from being started if alcohol is detected on the driver's breath. Most devices require periodic retesting while the car is running to ensure that the driver is not drinking once the car is started. Technological advances have made ignition interlock devices smaller, more accurate and less susceptible to tampering. Many courts include the use of devices when sentencing DUI offenders. During sentencing, an offender whose driver's license has been suspended or revoked may be granted limited driving privileges if an ignition interlock device is installed. About 146,000 ignition interlock devices currently are in use in the United States.

State Action State ignition interlock laws vary greatly. Currently, 47 states and the District of Columbia have some type of law. Twenty-five states require installation of an interlock device after some repeat offenders or high BAC offenders are convicted. In some states, the license revocation period may be shortened if an interlock device is installed. Eight states and the District of Columbia allow judicial discretion in sentencing offenders. Alabama, South Dakota and Vermont have no ignition interlock law.

In 2005, New Mexico became the first state to require ignition interlock devices for all convicted drunken drivers, including first-time offenders. As of December



2009, Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Utah and Washington had passed legislation to require ignition interlock devices for all convicted drunken driving offenders. New York's law takes effect in August 2010, and Hawaii's law is effective in January 2011.

New laws in nine states require devices for all DUI offenders.

Three states address interlocks for first-time offenders with certain qualifications. Colorado's ignition interlock law is not mandatory for first-time offenders. The law provides strong incentives to use ignition interlocks by allowing first-time offenders' license suspension to be reduced from nine months to one month if an interlock is installed. Illinois requires first-time offenders to have interlocks installed unless an offender chooses in writing not to do so. Arkansas allows discretion to issue an ignition interlock license to a first-time offender.

In 2009, 32 states considered some sort of ignition interlock legislation, and two passed pilot programs. Minnesota's program—available to all DUI offenders—is administered by the Minnesota Department of Public Safety, Driver and Vehicle Services. The program allows first-time and repeat DUI offenders to regain driving privileges if they participate in the pilot program. First-time offenders must use an ignition interlock device for one year, after a 15-day license suspension. Second- or third-time offenders must use the device for a year and six months after a 30-day license suspension. The pilot project began July 1, 2009, and will end June 30, 2011. The commissioner must submit a final report to the Legislature by Sept. 30, 2011, evaluating the pilot project, including information on participation rates, and recommending whether to continue an ignition interlock program. California's pilot program requires interlocks for all DUI offenders in four counties. The DMV must report to the Legislature on the pilot program's effectiveness in reducing the number of first-time DUI violations and repeat offenses.

In 2009, two states authorized ignition interlock pilot programs.

Virginia modified its ignition interlock law in 2009, making it a Class 1 misdemeanor for anyone required to have an interlock installed to operate a vehicle without the device. Convicted drivers also are subject to license revocation. Many other states are revising their laws to provide penalties for offenders who violate ignition interlock laws.

Effects of state laws. Research shows that installation of these devices reduces recidivism by between 50 percent and 90 percent. A Maryland study of repeat offenders showed that interlock program participation reduced the risk of committing an alcohol traffic violation within the first year by 65 percent. A 2002 Illinois study found offenders who used ignition interlock devices were 20 percent less likely to be re-arrested for a DUI during the first year, compared to offenders who did not install the device. The installation rate of ignition interlocks is key in determining a law's effectiveness. Approximately 1.4 million drunken driving offenders are arrested and convicted each year, yet only 10 percent of convicted DWI drivers ordered to install an interlock device on their vehicle have done so.

Federal Action In preparing to reauthorize the surface transportation program (SAFETEA-LU), Congress is considering provisions that would require states to enact and enforce ignition interlock laws. In the provisions under debate, states would have to enact mandatory ignition interlock laws for all those convicted of driving while intoxicated and require the device to be installed for at least six months for the first offense. States would lose a percentage of highway maintenance funds for failing to pass such laws. The bill was introduced in December 2009.

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