



# Vehicle Registration Compliance in Wisconsin

PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK

## BRIEF

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) conducted an investigation to improve its passenger vehicle registration processes, with the goals to modernize techniques, reduce costs, enhance security and maximize compliance. WisDOT's Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) needed accurate information on the current level of Wisconsin residents' compliance with vehicle registration and barriers that prevent residents from properly registering vehicles.

### What's the problem?

Vehicle registration fees account for roughly one third of total state transportation fund revenues, which offset DMV operation costs and support the WisDOT budget. Wisconsin has annual registration and license plate renewal. Depending on the rate of noncompliance, this could have a significant effect on the budget.

### Research objectives

Christensen Associates was commissioned to conduct a three-phase project:

1. Study registration compliance for automobiles and light trucks
2. Investigate reasons for noncompliance
3. Develop a list of possible changes to the vehicle registration process to improve compliance

### Methodology

The study of registration compliance was based on a field survey of vehicles in eight Wisconsin counties conducted during September-December 2013. Photographic images of rear license plates on autos and light trucks were collected and matched with WisDOT records to determine the degree of compliance.

A mail survey was conducted to investigate reasons for vehicle registration noncompliance. The survey asked respondents for suggestions as to how the registration process could be improved. Based on the responses the researchers developed a list of possible changes to improve the vehicle registration process.

Social service agencies in Dane and Milwaukee counties were also contacted for insights on issues related to registration compliance that might be particularly important for low-income households.

Investigator



**Philip Schoech**

Laurits R.  
Christensen  
Associates, Inc.  
peschoech@lrca.  
com



License plate with stickers

## Results

The researchers found that of the 18,546 vehicles observed during the 2013 field survey, 391 had expired registrations. This represents 2.1 percent of the total surveyed. A follow-up analysis in March 2014 found that 253 of the 391 vehicles with expired registrations had been renewed, and 11 license plates were no longer associated with the previously documented vehicle. The remaining 127 vehicles with expired registrations represented 0.7 percent of the 18,546 vehicles in the field survey. Reasons given by survey respondents for late registration were primarily forgetting to register, not receiving the renewal notice, losing the notice and not having the money for renewal at the time.

Researcher analysis of weight registration compliance of light trucks (class A, B or C) revealed roughly 34 and two percent of class A and B trucks, respectively, are likely out of compliance with their weight limits, with zero percent of class C trucks likely out of compliance.

## Recommendations

When investigating reasons for vehicle registration noncompliance and asking survey respondents for improvement suggestions, the researchers and Technical Oversight Committee developed a list of possible changes to the registration process. The possible changes listed below are intended to address vehicle owners forgetting registration renewal, renewal notifications getting lost, reducing costs associated with registration and improving customer service:

1. Notification of expired registration by mail
2. Changing the size and shape of the mail piece
3. Eliminating or reducing fees for electronic and in-person transactions
4. Improving hours or increasing number of sites for in-person registration and emissions testing

Given the relatively low number of vehicles operating with expired registrations in Wisconsin, WisDOT gave careful consideration to the benefits versus the costs of implementing these recommendations. Ultimately, changes were not pursued upon the determination that there would not be a cost benefit.

Project Manager



**Mitchell Warren**

WisDOT Division of  
Motor Vehicles  
mitchell.warren@dot.  
wi.gov

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