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Who Lacks ID and Proof of Citizenship in California Today? An Exploration of Voter ID Access, Barriers, and Knowledge

Analyses Conducted by the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement
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BACKGROUND

Coming out of the contentious 2000 general elections both the states and US federal government ushered in a wide range of changes to our electoral system. What identification, if any, is necessary to register and/or vote has become one of the longest standing and contentious debates. Georgia was one of the first states in the country to adopt a strict photo ID requirement for those seeking to vote in-person.[1] Since that time the states have adopted a wide range of laws that request or require a photo ID. Additionally, the federal government and a growing number of states have pursued policies that would add additional requirements to show documentary proof of citizenship during the voter registration process.

In light of policy discussions regarding voter ID and proof-of-citizenship legislation in California and nationally, VoteRiders and the Center for Democracy and Civic Engagement (CDCE) at the University of Maryland contracted with SSRS, a highly regarded survey firm, to survey a representative sample of the California adult US citizen population. Our primary goal was to examine the extent to which adult citizens in California have the ID they might need in order to vote if California changes its voter ID law. Since documents are not currently needed for most California voters when voting,[2] this allows us to provide a sensitivity analysis that explores how various provisions could impact the number of people who would be able to vote with the ID they have. We also sought to gauge Californian's understanding of current voter ID laws, and to assess attitudes about the expense and wait time to get key documents to prove identity and citizenship in California. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first survey of voting eligible Californians with questions specifically about the types of identification voting eligible Californians have.[3] This research builds on national survey research conducted in 2023 and state surveys in Georgia and Texas.[4]

The sample of 1,561 respondents was drawn from SSRS's probability panel with a supplement from the Verasight probability panel. Included in the sample are oversamples of 18-24-year-olds, Black respondents, and naturalized citizens. The survey was fielded November 19, 2025 - December 8, 2025. All of the results below are weighted. The survey instrument was

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[1] See Table 2 in Biggers, Daniel R., and Michael J. Hanmer. 2017. "Understanding the adoption of voter identification laws in the American states." *American Politics Research* 45(4): 560-588.

[2] Those who are voting for the first time in a federal election, registered by mail or online, and did not provide a CA ID or SSN when registering must show one of the following IDs (photocopy send to the county elections official prior to voting if voting by mail): CA driver's license; CA State ID card; U.S. Passport; student or military ID; utility bill; bank statement; paycheck or government check; or official mail from a government agency. (https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/where-and-how#first-time, last visited 3/17/26)

[3] Throughout this report when we refer to Californians we are referring to voting age US citizens who are residents of the state of California.

[4] For additional analysis see CDCE's voter ID landing page.

developed by CDCE with consultation from VoteRiders. The survey was available in English or Spanish, with Spanish translation provided by SSRS in consultation with Dr. Selene M. Gomez of VoteRiders. CDCE conducted all of the data analysis. To obtain population estimates we apply the survey results to the U.S. Census Current Population Survey's estimates of the citizen voting-age population in California.[5] A summary of the main results follows. The topline results are available at this link.

A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT ID LAWS

A look across the country reveals that there are a wide variety of voter identification laws in place. For states that elect to request or require that potential voters provide documentary ID when voting, we find it most useful to characterize the laws based on how **comprehensive and flexible** they are. By **comprehensive** we mean how many options there are for potential voters to meet their state's main expectations during the voting process with respect to the forms of ID that are accepted. States choose how comprehensive the law is along the following dimensions:

- Form of ID (e.g. driver's license, state ID card, gun permit, public college ID, utility bill)
- Photo or not
- Degree of name match
- Address match
- Government issuing the ID, including out-of-state
- Expiration date

By **flexible** we mean what options are available to those who do not meet the main requirements when they are attempting to vote. Here, the primary options, some of which are used together, include:

- Provisional ballot, and whether follow up by the voter to provide ID is needed
- Signature match
- Providing biographical information (e.g. birth date)
- Signing an affidavit
- Vouching (e.g. a poll worker can vouch to verify the individuals identity)

For example, if the California legislature opts to or is required to enact a new voter ID law, it will have to decide how comprehensive and flexible to make the law. As of this writing, except for a specific type of new voter (see footnote 2), Californians voting in person state their name and address and sign the poll book. Election officials verify they are registered voters through a review of the poll book. California is a vote-by-mail state, so all registered voters receive a ballot in the mail. Voters who choose to vote by mail must sign the return envelope. Election officials compare the signature on the envelope with the signature on the voter registration record.

[5] We use the latest estimates from 2024, with the overall population estimate coming from Table 4a at:. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-587.html

RESULTS

We begin our analysis with an examination of driver's licenses, exploring how variations in the comprehensiveness of a potential voter ID law in California might influence the proportion of Californians who have a driver's license they could use to vote if the law changes. We then examine state ID cards, and other forms of ID to estimate the proportion of Californians who do not have any government issued photo ID or no government issued ID at all. The next section provides details about how rates of ownership of key types of ID vary by demographics and party ID. We conclude with an analysis of potential confusion around the current voter ID laws in California and attitudes about the cost and wait time to receive documents one might need to replace.

SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS

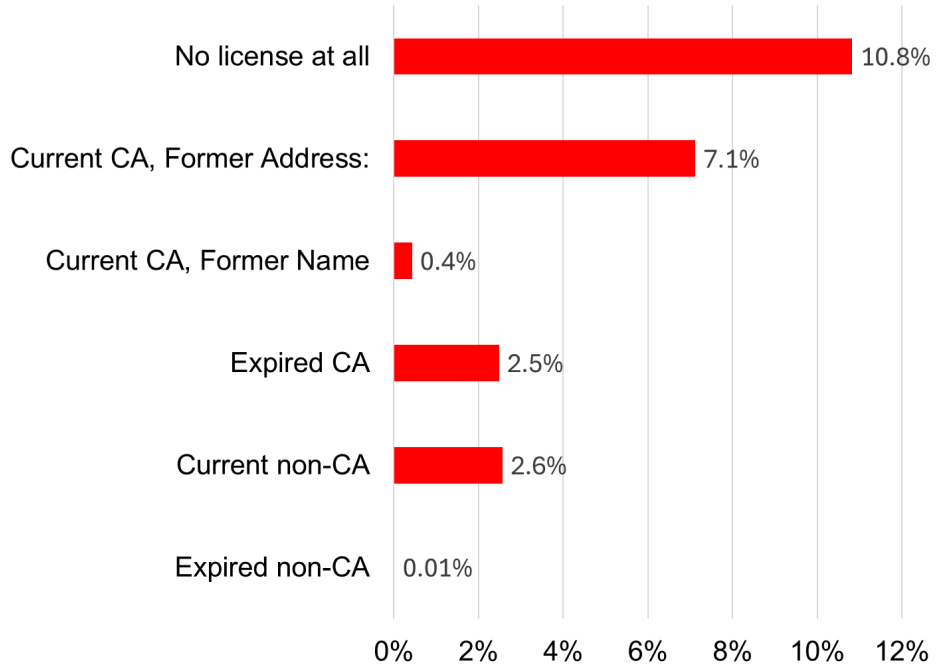
Driver's Licenses

Nearly 2.7 million Californians do not have a current (non-expired) driver's license at all. Just under 11%, or about 2.7 million people, who are U.S. citizens aged 18 or older in California do not have a driver's license, from California or any other state, current or expired. The majority of Californians (77%) have a current (non-expired) license with both their current name and address. Under any voter ID regime that does not also include proof of citizenship, these 77% would be able to use their CA license to vote.

The remaining group of Californians (nearly 13%) have a license, but it has an address that is not current, a name that is not current, is expired, is from another state, or has some combination of those features. The bulk of those in this category are those who have a current CA license with their current name but with an old address (7%, or about 1.8 million people). With regard to identity, those individuals would not face any issues, as the name and photo could be used, but verification of residency would require another document. The next largest group (3%, or about 650k people) have a current out-of-state-license with their current name. About 2.5%, or 630k Californians, have an expired CA license. Within that group, the largest categories are those who have an expired CA license with their current name and address (1.4% of Californians), and those who have an expired CA license with their current name but an old address (1% of Californians). A small percentage of Californians have a license with a name that is not current; having a former address is much more common. See Figure 1.

Whether those who have a license but not one that is from CA, that is current (non-expired), and has their current name and address could use their license to vote would depend on how a new law is written. The most comprehensive approach would allow over 3 million Californians to use their license in addition to the 77% of Californians (about 19.4 million) who have a current (non-expired) CA license with current name and address. **That is, focusing only on driver's licenses, allowing for an old address would allow nearly 1.8 million Californians to use their current (non-expired) CA license, allowing an out-of-state license would allow another 650k to use their license, and allowing an expired CA license would add another 630k to the list of those who could use their license.** Allowing for other features (such as an expired out-of-state license) would add more, but our estimates suggest these additions would be relatively small.

Figure 1. Percentage of Californians Who Do Not Have a Current (Non-Expired) CA License with Current Address and Current Name



Other ID

The primary tool to prove identity for those without a driver's license is the official state ID card. **While the majority of Californians without a driver's license have an official CA state ID card, 24% do not.** That is, overall 2.6% of Californians do not have any driver's license or official state ID card at all. This translates to over 650,000 Californians.

When we ask about a variety of other IDs such as passport, military ID, and student ID, we find that 1.5% of Californians, or about 385k, do not have a non-expired license, non-expired state ID, or other non-expired government issued photo ID. Those facing a potential problem using an ID to vote drops to 1.1% if IDs that are expired, from another state, or from a private high school or college are included as viable. **Our estimates indicate that about 0.8% of Californians, or just under 200k, do not have any government issued ID at all, including government ID that does not have a photo.** These results are summarized in Figure 2 below.

Several forms of ID stand out as particularly common among those who might need to use ID other than a driver's license or official state ID card if CA changes their ID law (see Table 1). Among those who do not have a driver's license or official state ID card at all 29% have a current passport that is readily accessible, 9% have an expired passport that is readily accessible, and 13% have a current public school ID (high school or college). Among those who

have a license or and/or official state ID card but that might not be able to use it if a new CA law is not particularly comprehensive (with regard to expiration date, issuing state, name match, and address match again) current passports that are readily accessible (48%) are the most common form of ID. This is followed by a current military ID (26%), current public school ID (high school or college) (19%), readily accessible expired passport (14%), and a current government employee ID (13%).

Figure 2. Percentage of Californians Who Do Not Have ID

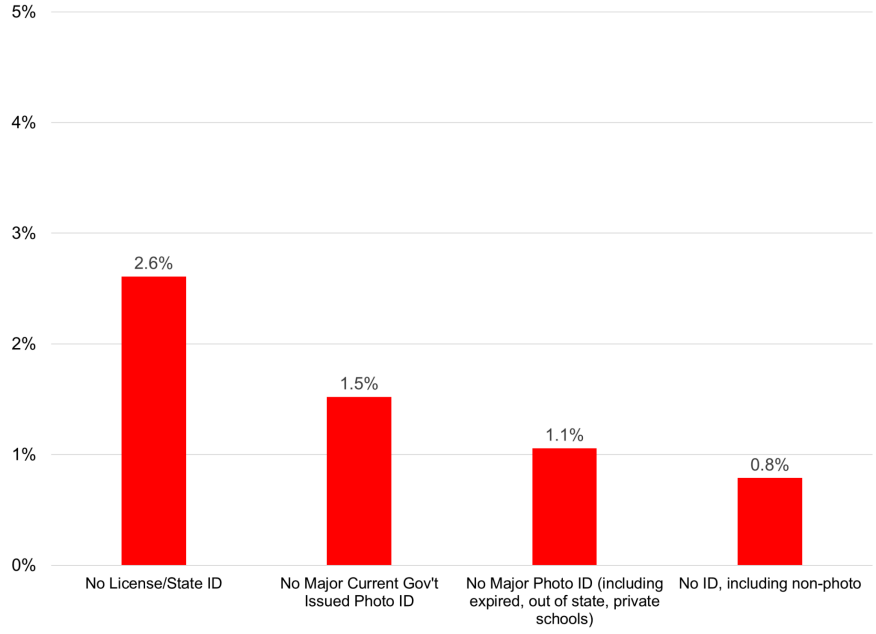


Table 1. What Other IDs are Most Common Among Those Who Might Not Be Able To Use A Driver's License or Official State ID Card to Vote[6]

ID Type	No License and No State ID	Other - Depends on the Law
Current Accessible Passport	29%	48%
Expired Accessible Passport	9%	14%
Current Military ID	0%	26%
Current Public School Student ID (HS or College)	13%	19%
Current Government Employee ID	0%	13%

[6] Note that the IDs listed may or may not contain an exact name match, our primary interest here is identity, which can be verified via the photo.

DRIVER'S LICENSE OWNERSHIP BY INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

Millions of Californians across political parties do not have a license. Eleven percent of Democrats (1.4 million people), 4% of Republicans (350,000 people), and 21% of independents/others (825,000 people) indicate they do not have a license at all.

Californian people of color are disproportionately less likely to have a current driver's license. Nineteen percent of Asian American/Pacific Islanders, 18% of Black Californians, and 14% of Hispanic Californians do not have a driver's license, compared to just 3% of White Californians.

Young Californians are less likely to have a driver's license. About 8% of Californians age 25 or older do not have a license, while 35% of Californians ages 18-24 do not have a license at all, which we estimate to be over one-million Californians.[7]

People with less education and lower annual incomes are more likely to lack a current driver's license. Twenty-seven percent of people without a high school degree do not have a driver's license at all. Twenty-two percent of high school graduates and 11% of those with some post-high school education do not have a license compared to 4% of college graduates and 1% of those with some post-college education. Californians with annual incomes under $30,000 are disproportionately less likely to have a license, with 34% not having a license at all. By comparison, 7% of those making between $30,000 and $50,000 annually, 6% making between $50,000 and $100,000 and 2% of those making over $100,000 do not have a license at all.

People with a disability are far more likely to lack a current driver's license. Twenty-two percent of people who self-identified as having a disability do not have a license at all, compared to 8% of non-disabled people.

Californians provided a variety of reasons to explain why they do not have a driver's license. The most common reasons include "Driving makes me anxious/afraid" (14%) and "I can't drive for medical reasons or a disability" (14%). Some people do not have a license because they "don't like driving/don't drive" (11%) or they are "not interested" (6%). Twenty-six **percent of individuals without a driver's license cite bureaucratic or economic factors as the reasons for which they do not have a license,** including the cost of getting a license (6%), cost of buying a car (9%), cost of car insurance (3%), lack of underlying documents (3%), or because "the process is too complicated" (5%).

Passports are another common type of photo ID. **Sixty-percent of Californians have an unexpired passport with their current name, but 24% do not have a passport at all.** Two in ten Democrats and Republicans do not have a passport (21% and 22% respectively), compared to 37% of independents. Black Californians are disproportionately less likely to have a passport (53%) than Hispanic Californians (26%) and White Californians (19%). The overwhelming

[7] Population estimate uses Table 4c at:
https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-587.html

majority of AAPI Californians do have an unexpired passport with their correct name (83%); in fact, 7% of AAPI Californians do not have a passport. Californians in higher income brackets are more likely to have a passport than those in lower income brackets. Nearly half (49%) of Californians with annual incomes under $30,000 do not have a passport, compared to 35% of those making between $30,000-$50,000, 22% of those making between $50,000-$100,000, and just 5% of those making more than $100,000 annually.

DOCUMENTARY PROOF OF CITIZENSHIP

Over 3 million voting-age Californians who are US citizens (14%) would have difficulty showing documentation proving their citizenship (documentary proof of citizenship, or DPOC). Documents proving citizenship include US Birth Certificates, US passports or passport cards, US Naturalization Certificates, and US Certificates of Citizenship.[8] **525,000 Californians (2%) do not have any DPOC at all, while 7% cannot readily access their DPOC.**[9] Six percent of Californians report they can easily access their DPOC documents, but their documents do not reflect their current legal name.

AAPI Californians are less likely to have difficulties producing documentary proof of citizenship compared to other racial groups. **9 in 10 AAPI Californians can readily access some form of DPOC that reflects their current name (92%)**, compared to 81% of Black Californians, 85% of Hispanic Californians, and 86% of White Californians. However, AAPI Californians and Hispanic Californians are twice as likely as Black Californians to report not having any DPOC at all (4% and 2%, respectively), and just 1% of White Californians do not have any DPOC. Different racial groups experience different difficulties with providing DPOC. Fifteen percent of Black Californians have trouble accessing their DPOC, compared to 3% of AAPI Californians, 7% of Hispanic Californians, and 6% of White Californians. Meanwhile, 9% of White Californians have DPOC with the wrong name, compared to 1% of AAPI Californians, 2% of Black Californians, and 5% of Hispanic Californians.

Similarly, men and women have different problems with providing DPOC. **Around 380,000 Californian men (3%) do not have any DPOC, compared to about 151,000 (just over 1%) Californian women.**[10] However, 11% of Californian women report not having DPOC that reflects their current name, but less than 1% of Californian men report the same. Similarly, 8% of Californian women cannot easily access their DPOC, compared to 6% of Californian men.

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[8] We do not include expired U.S. passports in this analysis. There are no expiration dates for the other three documents. We do not know how individual states will handle expired U.S. passports.
[9] We assessed whether items used for DPOC were “in a place you could quickly find it if you had to show it tomorrow.”
[10] Population estimates use Table 4b at::
https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/voting-and-registration/p20-587.html

Californians across the political spectrum face challenges providing DPOC; **12% of Democrats, 13% of Republicans, and 16% of political independents have difficulty showing DPOC.** Twice as many Democrats than Republicans report not having any DPOC (2% and 1% respectively). But, **twice as many Republicans than Democrats have DPOC without their correct name (8% and 4%, respectively)**. Inaccessible DPOC is a problem for members of both parties, with 7% of Democrats and 5% of Republicans indicating they have DPOC, but would have trouble accessing it.

As with driver's licenses, people with less education and lower annual incomes are more likely to have difficulty providing DPOC. Five percent of those in the two lowest income brackets (less than $30,000 annually and between $30,000 - $50,000 annually) have no DPOC at all, compared to just 1% of those making over $100,000, and virtually none of those making between $50,000 - $100,000. Meanwhile, 9% of people without a high school degree have no DPOC at all, compared to 2% of those with a high school degree.

VOTER CONFUSION

Nearly 6 in 10 Californians are confused about their state's current in-person voter ID requirements. California does not currently require voters to show ID at the polls, yet 27% think they are required to show ID, and 37% are unsure. While the majority know they do not have to provide a copy of their ID when submitting a mail-in ballot (63%), 5% think they do and another 32% are unsure. This confusion and misperception affects all partisan groups. Thirty-percent of Democrats think voter ID is required to vote in-person, while 38% are unsure. For Republicans, 23% answered incorrectly, and 30% are unsure. White Californians are more likely to correctly answer that they currently do not have voter ID requirements for in-person voting (44%) compared to AAPI Californians (27%), Black Californians (25%), and Hispanic Californians (36%). In addition to the decisions legislators would need to make regarding comprehensiveness and flexibility, state officials would need a plan to educate California voters if the state changes current requirements regarding the ID needed to vote.

ID COSTS

Many Californians are concerned about the cost and wait times associated with obtaining IDs. In California, it costs between $36 to $45 to get a new driver's license. **Two in ten Californians say it would be "difficult" to pay for a new driver's license**, including 4% saying it would be "very difficult." Similarly, **19% of Californians would find it "difficult" to spend $29 on an official copy of a Californian birth certificate,** including 5% who would find it "very difficult." Currently in California, the processing time for obtaining a California driver's license or a California state ID is 2 weeks for online applications or 4 weeks for mail applications. Twenty-nine percent of Californians find these wait times "unacceptable." This is a bipartisan issue; 28% of Democrats and 26% of Republicans find the driver's license wait time "unacceptable," and 29% of Democrats and 26% of Republicans find the state ID wait time "unacceptable." Similarly, 46% of Californians find the 4-6 week processing time for U.S. passports "unacceptable," and over half (56%) find the 5-7 week processing time for California

birth certificates “unacceptable.” Fifty-five percent of both Democrats and Republicans find the birth certificate processing time “unacceptable,” and 46% of Democrats and 42% of Republicans say the same about U.S. passport processing times.

CONCLUSION

As California voters and legislators consider changes to current ID-to-vote requirements, it is important to understand who lacks ID and proof of citizenship in the state. This survey provides current data on who lacks these documents—informing both voters and policymakers as they weigh potential changes, and helping the public understand what those changes would mean in practice.[11]

[11] Additional results are shown in the Appendix.

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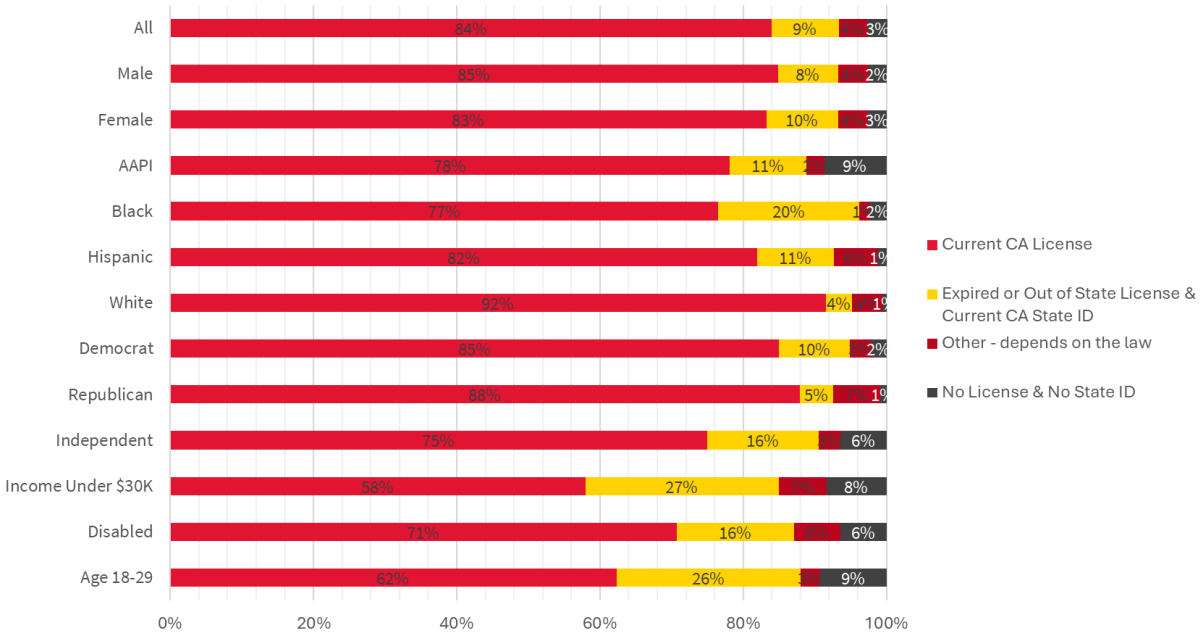
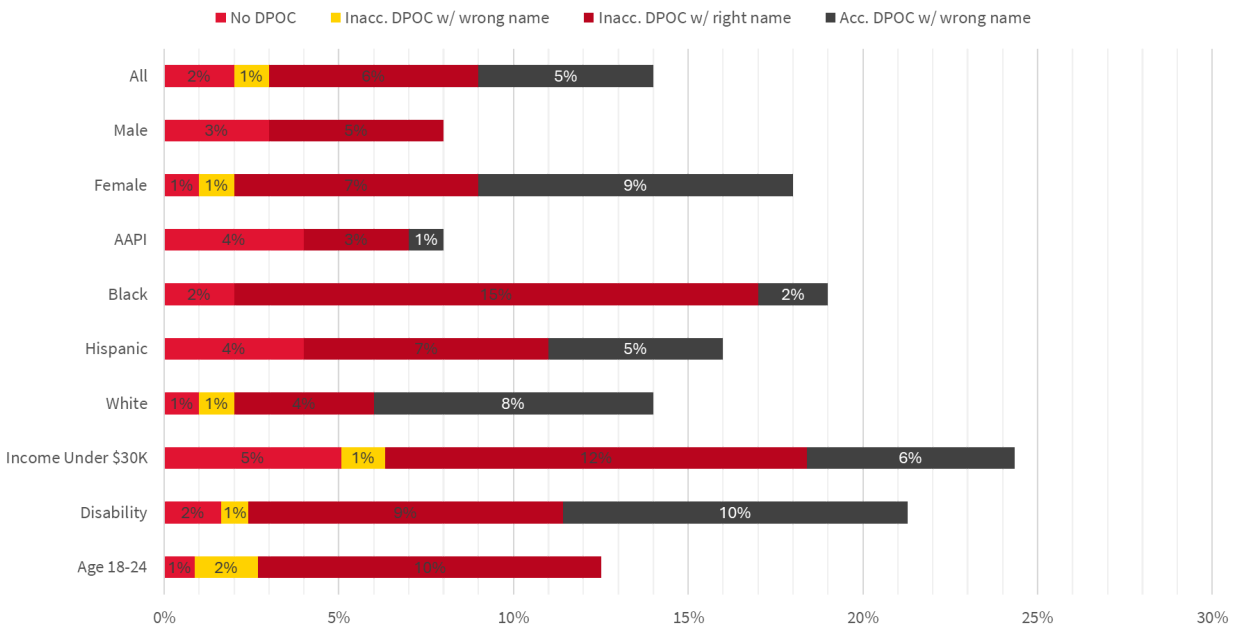
Appendix

Appendix Table 1. License and State ID Summary by Individual Characteristics



Appendix Table 2. Potential Problems with Documentary Proof of Citizenship by Individual Characteristics