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ResearchReport

Connecticut Law on Passing a Stopped School Bus

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Issue

Summarize Connecticut's law on passing a stopped school bus (i.e., stop arm law) and provide (1) the current penalties, (2) a history of penalty increases since 1980, and (3) proposals to increase the penalty since its last increase. This report has been updated by OLR Report 2024-R-0205.

Summary

Connecticut's stop arm law generally requires drivers to (1) stop their vehicles at least 10 feet from the front or rear of a school bus that is displaying its flashing red signal lights and (2) remain there until the bus no longer displays the lights.

Any person who violates this law faces a $450 fine for the first offense. For each subsequent offense, a violator faces a fine of $500 to $1,000, up to 30 days in jail, or both. (For a comparison of Connecticut's penalties to those in other states, see OLR Report 2019-R-0198.) These penalties have changed only twice since 1980, most recently in 2011. Since then, there has been only one bill proposing to increase the penalties.

"Stop Arm" Laws

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the act of illegally passing a stopped school bus with red lights flashing is commonly known as a "stop-arm violation." This refers to the stop-sign shaped "arm" that extends from the left side of the bus when the red lights are activated.

Connecticut Law

By law, when a driver approaches a school bus displaying its flashing red signal lights, he or she must immediately stop his or her vehicle at least 10 feet from the front or rear of the bus and

remain stopped until the bus no longer displays its red signal lights, unless otherwise directed by a traffic officer (CGS § 14-279). At intersections, drivers are generally prohibited from turning toward a school bus that is receiving or discharging passengers.

Under the law, police must issue a written warning or a summons to the owner of a vehicle who illegally passes a school bus "upon a written report from any school bus operator…specifying the license plate number, color and type of any vehicle observed by such operator or recorded by a camera affixed to such school bus." The driver's report must also note the date, approximate time, and location of the violation (CGS § 14-283(j)).

State law also allows municipalities to install video monitoring systems on school buses to enhance enforcement (CGS § 14-279a). More information on the law governing these systems is available in OLR report 2018-R-0289.

Penalties

Current Penalties

Any person who violates Connecticut's stop arm law faces a $450 fine for the first offense. For each subsequent offense, a violator faces a fine of $500 to $1,000, up to 30 days imprisonment, or both (CGS § 14-279(b)). The Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) also assesses four points against a motorist's driver's license each time he or she is convicted of illegally passing a school bus. DMV suspends a driver's license after a person receives more than 10 points (Conn. Agencies Reg., § 14-137a-5, et seq).

The law requires the state to remit 80% of the fines collected from violators to the municipalities in which the violations occur. The state must distribute the remaining fine revenue into the Special Transportation Fund (12% of the total) and the General Fund (8% of the total) (CGS § 51-56a(e)).

Penalty History

The penalties for violating the stop arm law have changed only twice since 1980. PA 80-245 established penalties of (1) a $100 to $500 fine for first offenses and (2) a $500 to $1,000 fine, up to 30 days imprisonment, or both for subsequent offenses. PA 11-255 set the fine for a first offense at $450, while the penalties for subsequent offenses remained unchanged.

Proposed Changes

We identified only one proposal to change the stop arm violation penalties since they were last changed in 2011. Proposed Senate Bill 67 (2019) proposed increasing the penalties to (1) a

$1,000 fine and a 60-day license suspension for a first offense and (2) a $2,000 and six-month license suspension for subsequent offenses. The bill was referred to the Transportation Committee, but it did not receive a public hearing.

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