As numerous states consider issuing driver’s licenses to illegal immigrants, officials in New Mexico, which already does, say they are struggling to prevent out-of-staters from fraudulently obtaining them.

Until recently, undocumented immigrants were able to obtain driver’s licenses or permits only from three states: New Mexico, Washington and Utah. But that number is poised to grow.

The governor of Illinois signed into law in January a bill that grants licenses to those who lack a Social Security number, while the governors of Maryland and Oregon approved such bills earlier this month. Lawmakers in Connecticut passed an immigrant-license law Thursday, which Gov. Dannel Malloy is expected to sign.

Similar bills sit on the desks of the governors of Colorado, Vermont and Nevada, while a number of other legislatures are considering the move.

Supporters say granting such licenses makes streets safer, since the immigrants must take a driving test. Some police agencies say the licenses allow them to keep better track of this population. Immigrant advocates say the licenses give this group needed mobility.

“Individuals have to get to jobs and schools,” said Melissa Keaney, an attorney with the National Immigration Law Center, a Los Angeles-based advocacy group.

Raymond Rael, the police chief in Santa Fe, N.M., said immigrants with licenses are less likely to flee an accident, and more inclined to cooperate with police. “It does improve our relationship with the immigrant community,” he said. “It’s easier to talk to them if they’re stopped for whatever reason.”

Opponents said the licenses give legitimacy to people who aren’t supposed to be in the country and might be dangerous.

“It really is an open invitation to terrorists, criminals or anyone who wants to create a new identity for themselves,” said Jessica Vaughan, director of policy studies at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit group that wants to reduce the flow of immigrants.

In New Mexico, where undocumented immigrants have been able to obtain driver’s licenses since 2003, some officials say the law has become a headache.

New Mexico investigators recently busted a Mexican immigrant who tried to obtain a license with the help of a criminal ring. The ring, officials said, used fake New Mexico addresses to create fraudulent documents for out-of-state immigrants, charging $2,500 per license.
State police in April arrested the Mexican immigrant, who lived in Georgia. Authorities canceled 40 licenses the ring had helped secure for 40 other immigrants from Latin America.

In another case, two Central American immigrants were arrested in April for applying for licenses using fake residential leases provided by another criminal group. The immigrants, who had paid $1,500 each for help in securing the licenses, found out about the group’s services through an ad in a New York newspaper, according to state investigators.

Demesia Padilla, the cabinet secretary at New Mexico’s Taxation and Revenue Department, which oversees the state’s Motor Vehicle Division, says it is costly and time-consuming to perform background checks to ensure applicants live in the state, and complains that the department lacks the resources to do the job.

“It’s created a lot of operational problems,” Ms. Padilla said. “And it’s costly.”

Some New Mexico lawmakers have launched repeated efforts to repeal the license law, with the support of Republican Gov. Susana Martinez. But so far, they have failed.

Ms. Padilla said her agency had to open a fourth office in Albuquerque last year to deal with immigrant licenses. Earlier this year, the agency couldn’t investigate a potentially fraudulent ring because it already was busy with two others, she said. “We’re doing this full time,” she said. “There’s not ever a slowdown.”

Immigrant advocates counter that state officials opposed to the licenses overstate the fraud problem. “They are very much against it for political reasons, not for practical reasons,” said Marcela Diaz, executive director of Somos Un Pueblo Unido, a Santa Fe-based immigrant rights group.

Other states that provide licenses to undocumented immigrants say they are taking steps to prevent fraud. The new Maryland law requires applicants to prove they have paid taxes in the state for two years, or that they are a dependent of someone who has, said Buel Young, a spokesman for the state’s Motor Vehicle Administration.

The flurry of immigrant license proposals marks a reversal from policies adopted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which led many states to require driver’s-license applicants to submit proof of legal status.

As more states grant licenses to those in the country illegally, fewer undocumented immigrants from other states are likely to seek the documents fraudulently, supporters of such policies said.