

Driving Opportunities: Ending Debt-Based Suspensions

AN OVERVIEW



FCCJ
FAIR CHANCE CRIMINAL
JUSTICE PROJECT

Ending driver's license suspension for unpaid traffic tickets and missed court dates in North Carolina is a common-sense reform that cannot wait.

The Opportunity

Nearly 1 million North Carolinians have a suspended driver's license, not because they are unsafe drivers, but because they cannot afford to pay traffic fines and fees or missed a court date. **A driver's license is often a gateway to employment, housing, education, and health care, especially in rural communities with limited public transportation.**

The Background: The Surge in Debt-Based License Suspensions

OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS, North Carolina has significantly expanded its criminal fines and fees system. The number of court fees increased from 4 to more than 50; the amount of fees ballooned 400 percent. This is at the same time that the state has steadily reduced income and corporate taxes, placing greater reliance on fines and fees to fund government functions.

Currently, a traffic ticket typically starts at \$190,

with costs added at each stage of the process. For many working families, these costs are unmanageable. Nationally, 4 in 10 people cannot immediately pay a \$400 emergency expense. When fines and fees accumulate into hundreds or thousands of dollars, missed payments and missed court dates often result in license suspension. Importantly, these suspensions are not tied to dangerous driving behavior, they are purely debt-based.

Why It Matters: Ending debt-based suspensions would:

- ▶ Enhance access to meaningful employment
- ▶ Support economic mobility for low-income families
- ▶ Improve housing and health care access
- ▶ Increase compliance with courts
- ▶ Reduce burdens on law enforcement and courts
- ▶ Support business stability and economic growth
- ▶ Promote family and child wellbeing

The Evidence-Based Reforms

North Carolina must act to improve opportunity and improve rates of payment and court appearance.

- ▣ End driver's license suspensions for unpaid traffic debt and missed court dates; and
- ▣ Replace with evidence-based practices such as court reminders, ability-to-pay assessments, and reasonable payment plans.

For more information, contact Laura Webb, laura@ncjustice.org