

# 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](mailto:laura@ncjustice.org)

# Driving Opportunities: BETTER CHILD WELL-BEING



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## The Opportunity

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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses are Beneficial to Child Wellbeing

- ▶ When parents can reliably drive, children are more likely to attend school consistently, get to medical appointments, and participate in enriching extracurricular activities, supporting healthy development and a strong sense of belonging.
- ▶ Stable transportation helps parents maintain steady employment, supporting family income and strengthening children's access to nutritious food, secure housing, and quality childcare, all of which promote their wellbeing.
- ▶ Children, whose parents continue driving out of necessity, are at risk of being exposed to traumatic law-enforcement interactions if their parents are pulled over or arrested.

### Driver's License Improves Parents' Ability to Care for their Children

- ▶ When parents have reliable transportation, they can more easily participate in pickup and drop-off for visitation, helping maintain strong, consistent parent-child relationships, even in separated or divorced families.
- ▶ Ensuring parents can transport their children safely and dependably supports stable custody arrangements and helps families stay connected and supported.

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# Driving Opportunities: IMPROVED COMPLIANCE



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## 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. Many people lose their licenses for years for these non-safety issues, even though other states have adopted proven alternatives that show these suspensions are not necessary. Ending unnecessary license suspensions can improve the state's appearance and collection rates.

## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses Can Lead to Better Compliance Rates

- ▶ Studies show that there is little to no evidence that license suspensions improve debt collection or court appearance.
- ▶ Driver's license suspension can only coerce debt repayment if the individual has sufficient resources available. If the individual is simply too poor to pay, driver's license suspension is an ineffective way to collect money.
- ▶ Data shows that ending license suspensions often improves collection and appearance rates.
- ▶ Ability-to-pay assessments, payment plans, payment reminders, and community service in lieu of costs - not driver's license suspensions - lead to increased collection rates.
- ▶ Court reminder systems, alternative court schedules, virtual court, transportation assistance program - not driver's license suspensions - lead to better appearance rates.

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# Driving Opportunities: STRONGER BUSINESSES AND A BETTER ECONOMY



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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses are Good for Business

- ▶ When more North Carolinians can maintain active driver's licenses, employers benefit from larger, more reliable talent pipelines, making it easier to find and retain qualified workers.
- ▶ A broader candidate pool, supported by reliable transportation or driver's licenses, strengthens the labor market, boosts productivity, and contributes to economic growth across the state.

### Driver's Licenses Strengthen the Economy

- ▶ Meaningful employment helps improve the economy by reducing public spending associated with cycles of re-incarceration, decreasing the number of people who rely on taxpayer-funded assistance programs such as public benefits initiatives, shelters, and social services to obtain food, housing, and other needed resources, and leading to more people being employed and paying income taxes into the economy.
- ▶ North Carolina can boost earnings by an estimated \$6.5 to \$8.8 billion by ensuring people are able to keep their driver's licenses and stay connected to work.
- ▶ Access to driver's licenses creates the potential for North Carolina to unlock more than \$680 million in additional economic activity.

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# Driving Opportunities: MEANINGFUL EMPLOYMENT



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## Why It Matters

### Driver's License Open Pathways to Meaningful Employment

- ▶ Most jobs require a valid driver's license or reliable transportation as a condition of employment.
- ▶ More than 80% of North Carolina residents drive to work. Many work in a different county from where they live. Individuals without a valid driver's license are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed.
- ▶ Having the ability to drive legally enables people to reliably reach job sites, interviews, and training opportunities.
- ▶ Public transportation options are limited across much of the state, particularly in rural areas. Public transit users are often restricted to jobs located near bus routes or within walking distance – significantly narrowing employment options.

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# Driving Opportunities: BETTER HEALTH OUTCOMES



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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses Expand Access to Health Care

- ▶ Reliable transportation improves access to medical care, helping individuals reach appointments, pharmacies, specialists, and urgent care when needed.
- ▶ Stable employment—supported by a valid driver's license—enhances health by enabling people to maintain insurance, manage chronic conditions, and afford essentials like nutritious food and safe housing
- ▶ Children in low-income homes often miss or do not schedule a medical appointment when families do not have reliable transportation.

### Driver's Licenses Support Physical and Mental Wellbeing

- ▶ With a valid driver's license, people get to work, childcare, court, and healthcare obligations without increased stress and anxiety of driving without a license.
- ▶ When older adults continue driving legally, they maintain stronger cognitive and physical abilities, stay connected to their communities, and are more likely to remain independent longer.

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# Driving Opportunities: SAFE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING



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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses Expand Housing Choice

- ▶ Reliable transportation is a key factor in choosing where to live.
- ▶ With a license, families can choose housing based on affordability and safety - not just proximity to public transit or within walking distance to essential services.
- ▶ Rural residents, where there is limited public transit, gain access to broader or more affordable housing options.

### Driver's Licenses Prevent Eviction

- ▶ Having a valid driver's license helps people maintain steady work and reliable income, which supports timely rent payments and stable housing.
- ▶ A survey of Wake County, NC residents with suspended driver's licenses found that 28.5% experienced eviction as a direct result of the suspension.

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# Driving Opportunities: REDUCED POVERTY



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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses are Essential to Economic Success

- ▶ A driver's license expands access to jobs, longer work hours, and opportunities for advancement.
- ▶ Reliable transportation helps individuals and families achieve economic stability and build wealth over time.
- ▶ Research shows that longer commute times for workers reliant on public transportation can result in thousands of dollars in lost wages each year.
- ▶ Counties with longer average commutes see lower rates of economic mobility for low-income families.

### Driver's Licenses Prevent Deeper Poverty

- ▶ Transportation access is one of the strongest predictors of whether a family escapes poverty.
- ▶ Reliable transportation can allow a person to get a better job, and possibly get out of poverty.
- ▶ When individuals can maintain their driver's licenses, they experience more social mobility. This creates more pathways to move out of low-income area.
- ▶ 75% of people whose licenses are suspended continue to drive – because they have to. If caught driving with a suspended license, they face more fines and fees for driving on a suspended license – creating a perpetual cycle of punishment and poverty.

## The Evidence-Based Reforms

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# Driving Opportunities: TRUE PUBLIC SAFETY

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## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses Lead to Safer Roads

- ▶ People with valid licenses typically keep their auto insurance active.
- ▶ Because 75% of people with suspended licenses still need to drive to work, school, childcare, and medical appointments, ensuring they can stay licensed reduces the number of unlicensed drivers.
- ▶ When more drivers can remain licensed and insured, everyone benefits from safer roads and reduced financial burdens after accidents.

### Driver's License Preserve Law Enforcement and Court Resources

- ▶ By keeping people licensed after non-safety-related issues, North Carolina can free officers to focus on safety, allow prosecutors to prioritize meaningful cases, and help judges manage more efficient dockets.
- ▶ Since 40% of suspensions involve issues unrelated to driving safety, keeping people licensed will allow law enforcement and court actors to focus time and resources on real public safety matters.

### Driver's Licenses Reduce Unneeded Legal Involvement

- ▶ When people can maintain valid licenses, they avoid new charges, additional fees, and the risk of incarceration.
- ▶ People with valid licenses often maintain insurance and registration, therefore avoiding additional charges or legal complications, and strengthening public safety.

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# Driving Opportunities: SUCCESSFUL REENTRY



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## 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. Driver's license suspension is one of the most significant, and often overlooked, barriers to successful reentry in North Carolina. Ending unnecessary license suspensions will bolster successful reentry.

## Why It Matters

### Driver's Licenses Bolster Successful Reentry

- ▶ Meaningful employment reduces the likelihood of recidivism. A suspended driver's license negatively impacts a person's ability to get and keep meaningful employment.
- ▶ Suspended licenses make it difficult – or impossible – for returning residents to attend court dates, probation meetings, treatment programs, or other legal obligations. Missing these obligations can result in further penalties or incarceration.
- ▶ In one study, it was discovered that for individuals living in rural communities, the lack of transportation was the largest barrier to abiding by parole or probation guidelines.
- ▶ Driving on a suspended license, often out of necessity, can lead to other criminal charges, such as driving while license revoked, without license, or with expired registration.

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