



People First, Not Punishment

How a Missed Court Date
Leads to a Missed Opportunity



NORTH CAROLINA
JUSTICE CENTER

Introduction



The stories in this book will show you the impact of a suspended driver's license for a failure to appear on families and communities in North Carolina. Together, they demonstrate the need for people-first policies that promote opportunity and stability rather than creating additional barriers.

North Carolina is one of the remaining states that still suspends driver's licenses for non-public safety related matters, such as a missed court date (also known as "failure to appear"). These administrative suspensions do not improve public safety because they are not based on dangerous driving.

Instead, driver's license suspensions for failure to appear create a cycle of instability that makes it harder for people to comply with the law. When individuals

lose their license because they missed a court date, they often lose the ability to get to work, care for family members, attend medical appointments, or return to court to resolve their underlying issue. This undermines, rather than promotes, accountability.

Other states have ended license suspensions for failure to appear and have seen improved court compliance and more opportunities for drivers to get back on the road safely. North Carolina can amend its state law to end these suspensions, reserving suspension for unsafe driving behavior. As an alternative to suspension, NC could use more effective, evidence-based tools, such as court reminder systems to promote appearance.

FAST FACTS

Did you know?

- **Nearly 1 million North Carolinians** have their driver's license suspended for reasons not related to driving, such as failure to pay or failure to appear.
- **1 in 10 North Carolinians** have a suspension because of a missed court date.
- **Most people who miss court do not do so intentionally.** They miss court because of inadequate notice, transportation barriers, work conflicts, or caregiving responsibilities.
- **Nearly 85% of North Carolina residents drive to work.**
- A driver's license **suspension limits access** to meaningful employment, secure housing, health care, and family support.
- Taking away someone's license **makes it harder** to get to court, meet with attorneys, pay fines and fees, and resolve underlying cases.
- **Debt-based drivers license suspension undermines public safety.** It forces police officers, prosecutors, and judges to spend valuable time and resources on activities that are not related to public safety.

01

Eastern North Carolina



Ana

I lost my driver's license because I missed court while I was working to help support myself. After a car wreck, I lost my transportation, which led to me losing my job and my car, and everything just kept piling up from there. Without a license, I can't drive, can't get another car, and can't get around. I didn't have reliable transportation to get to court. I have to rely on my family to get where I need to go, which is hard because I want to be independent, especially as a parent. Living in a place with limited public transportation and few job opportunities makes it even harder to get back on my feet, and not having a license has made it hard to move forward

Bryant

[I missed court date because of] fear of imprisonment for failure to pay previous fines. It has been difficult visiting family and my children and providing for their daily needs. Without my license it takes 6 more hours to get where I need to go.

Gregory

When I came out of prison, having a suspended driver's license became one of the biggest barriers to rebuilding my life. I initially found a job at a dry cleaner within walking distance of the transitional house where I was staying, but after my background check came back, I was fired. The next job I lined up was miles away. I drove for a couple of months without a license out of survival. I was trying to get my life in order, trying to get some income coming in. I prayed every tire roll that I would not get stopped by the police. Access to transportation is critical to re-entry success, it's how people get to jobs, community college classes, mental health care, and substance use treatment, but public transportation often doesn't reach where people need to go, ride share services are expensive, and relying on family and friends only goes so far. The distance between opportunity and stability can feel, and often be, impossible to cross.

Samantha

I live in a county where there's no public transportation. My license was suspended in 2023. Since then, every job I apply for—especially ones that require a valid driver's license—turns me down the moment I say mine is suspended. I've worked in call centers and applied for cashier and entry level jobs, but transportation and license requirements keep blocking me. Without reliable transportation, I depend on my mom or grandmother to get anywhere, and Uber is only an option when I have extra money, which is rare.

Not having a license has deeply affected my ability to care for my son. I often have to ask his father or my family to watch him because I can't drive him to childcare or to appointments, and some of his medical visits are two hours away. It's overwhelming to feel like I can't meet my child's needs simply because I can't legally drive.

Travis

I did not go to court because I was working, had no transportation, and I lost the court date. Now, I have to depend on my family to get around. It takes me 1.5 to 3 hours to get where I need to go. I lost my job because I was not able to travel to and from work. I have been turned down by jobs because of no license.



02

Central North Carolina



Hailey

Living in Richmond County without a driver's license has had a huge impact on my life. The public transportation here is super scarce. So when my license was suspended, it had a tremendous impact on my life because I had to drive to get to work. I have had so many driving without license tickets. I don't drive anymore because I'm trying not to get in anymore trouble. I don't want no ticket. I've had to rely on expensive Ubers, rides from other people, or a medical transport van that I have to pay for, and even then it's not always reliable. At one point, it cost me more to get to work than I made, and being late or missing rides put my jobs at risk. How do they expect you to pay for your tickets when your license is suspended? If you cannot drive to go to work? The suspension just made it harder to stay employed, go to school, and move forward with my life.

Mitchell

I live in Moore County, North Carolina, and getting around is tough because there's no public transportation—not even Uber. Driving has always been essential for me, especially for the type of work I usually do. I had my driver's license for years, but things went downhill after I missed a court date around 2023. I was probably at work and forgot about it, but missing that date caused my license to get suspended. I didn't even know it had been suspended at the time.

Because I can't legally drive, I've had to rely on walking or getting rides from people I know. That makes it really hard to stay employed. In fact, I'm unemployed right now. I had a job interview scheduled recently, but my ride fell through. Without work, all my bills have suffered, and it's affected everything—my ability to pay for food, health needs, and especially child support for my 12 year old son. I'm behind on that now too simply because I don't have steady income.

Tyana

Losing my driver's license has had a huge impact on my life. I missed the court date mostly because I

didn't have reliable transportation or money for things like Uber, and I was trying to take care of my daughter and get her to school. Without a license, it's been extremely hard to get around, and I ended up losing my job because I couldn't get to work reliably. Not having a license makes life hard.

Ashley

I will never forget taking my daughter to her first day of private school. After she walked inside, I sat in my car and cried—not out of sadness, but out of hope. I had grown up having to mature too quickly, slipping through the cracks of public school, falling into addiction, and spending years rebuilding my life. I have been clean and sober since October 2016 and am now enrolled full-time in college studying psychology with a focus on addiction, driven by a desire to help others find a better path. Giving my daughter opportunities I never had felt like proof that cycles can be broken.

That hope was shattered when my driver's license was suspended over a ticket I could not resolve. Unable to legally drive to court or transport my daughter to her private school, which had no bus service, I faced truancy charges and even the risk of jail. Due to missed school days caused by my inability to transport her legally, she is now repeating the 7th grade in public school. The suspension of my license did not make our situation better—it made it worse. It prevented me from complying with court requirements, maintaining my child's education, and continuing to move forward in my recovery and personal growth.

Latarsha

Losing my driver's license has affected almost every part of my daily life. I rely on transportation to get my son to and from school, go to the grocery store, and handle basic day to day needs. I also live with lupus, and not having a license has made it much harder to get to my doctor's appointments and treatments. I have to rely buses or rides from other people to get around, and that isn't always reliable.

03

Western North Carolina



Lacey

I live in a small town in Cleveland County with almost no public transportation. Everything I need—groceries, jobs, appointments—is 15–20 minutes away by car. I’m currently unemployed and caring for my 19 year old, my 10 year old, and my 23 year old disabled nephew, whom I took in after my mother passed in 2019. Without a license, getting anywhere is a struggle. I walk when I can, rely on Lyft when I can afford it, and one family member helps, but only on his schedule.

My driver’s license was suspended because I missed a court date. My first date was rescheduled due to the court closing at the start of COVID. The second one, I completely forgot about, my mother and father had just passed away, and everything was overwhelming. I didn’t even know I’d lost my license until I was pulled over two years later. To get it back, I owe around \$800–\$900, which I can’t pay without a job.

Losing my license has made it hard to get to doctor’s appointments; we’ve had to cancel or reschedule many. I’ve always had a clean driving record, so this has been really difficult. People who still have their licenses don’t realize how much they rely on them. I made a mistake by forgetting my court date, but I don’t think my license should have been suspended over it—especially without any reminder. A simple text message about the court date would have made a huge difference.

Lacy

When I lived in Rutherford County without a driver’s license, getting around felt nearly impossible, especially living outside the main parts of town. If you live in the outskirts of the main parts of town, the only way you can travel around is on foot if you don’t have a car or a driver’s license. If you have a bicycle and live on the outskirts, you have to ride a long distance that is often poorly lit and does not have any bike trails. This makes it hard getting to work, doctor’s ap-

pointments, or even basic errands. For people like me who needed to travel regularly, for example, to see my kids during a reunification case, not having a license created constant stress and barriers. Borrowing a car risks jail time, but not driving means missing critical obligations, so it becomes a downward spiral of fines, missed work, and deeper financial strain. On top of that, trying to get my license reinstated through the DMV was frustrating and confusing, with long waits, unclear instructions, and months of back-and-forth.

Free

For years, I drove without a valid license while raising two babies under two, doing everything I could to keep us safe and afloat, keeping insurance and registration current, staying out of the way, just trying to survive. My license was suspended because of an expired registration ticket that I missed court for. During a time when I was overwhelmed with pregnancy, childcare, and doing everything largely on my own [so I forgot]. One day at the park, a ranger decided to arrest me in front of my children over that old failure-to-appear.

Living without a license carried constant stress—the “riding dirty” feeling and the pit in your stomach every time you pass a police car. Even though I wasn’t working at the time and I owned my home, the mental burden was real and heavy. When I learned about [the driver’s license restoration] program and was able to get my license restored and several old issues expunged, it brought real relief and confidence.



Punished Unfairly

- **Young adults** are twice as likely to miss court as those aged 60 or older.
- **Black North Carolinians**, meanwhile, make up just 22% of the state's population, but 40% of criminal cases and 49% of missed court dates. Both statistics may suggest that members of these groups face significant barriers in getting to court.
- **Residents with low incomes** are disproportionately harmed because they are more likely to move frequently, lack reliable mail access, work jobs without paid leave, and rely on a car to meet basic survival needs.

Jimmy

I used to rely on my driver's license to take demolition, construction, and landscaping jobs across different counties. When my license was suspended, my ability to work collapsed. I was scared to drive and risk more tickets, more debt, and more court dates, so I lost nearly every opportunity I had to earn a living.

Losing my license pushed me into survival mode. I now have a little girl, a girlfriend, and her daughter who depend on me, but without the ability to drive, I've had to rely on my parents for rides or travel short distances while hoping I don't get pulled over. In my rural area, there's no public transportation, and Uber is too expensive. I've slept in a tent at job sites just to avoid driving back and forth and risking more charges. Not being able to provide for my family has taken a huge emotional toll—some days it feels unbearable. If I could sit down with a lawmaker, I'd tell them that people like me don't need punishment that lasts for years; we need leniency and a chance to get back on our feet. If I could get my license back tomorrow, I'd be working tomorrow night. I don't want a handout—just the opportunity to work, support my family, and pay off what I owe.





Evidence-Based Solutions That Improve Court Appearances

There is a common misconception that people miss court because they are avoiding responsibility. In reality, most people want to resolve their cases. Many simply don't have reliable transportation, don't receive clear reminders, or fear that showing up will mean arrest, new fees, or deeper financial harm. Based on the large number of North Carolina licenses that remain suspended, it is clear that the suspensions are not effective tools for encouraging court appearances or reducing the rate of failure to appear.

Several states, including Virginia, have changed their laws to end or limit driver's license suspensions for failure to appear.

There are better, evidence-based solutions to help improve court appearance. Research supports low-cost, supportive interventions rather than punitive measures like license suspensions or incarceration.

Evidence-based solutions that improve court appearance rates include:

- Court reminder systems
- Transportation and childcare assistance programs
- Virtual court options
- Court navigators and wraparound support

Court Reminder Systems

Court reminder systems such as text messages, phone calls, or emails, notify individuals of upcoming court dates and help reduce missed appearances. Research shows that automatic reminder systems, particularly those that enroll individuals by default, can increase court attendance rates by 10 to 60 percent.

CASE STUDY: Court Reminder Text Messages in Buncombe County

Buncombe County has implemented a low-cost court reminder program that sends text message notifications to individuals in the days leading up to their court dates. This model has proven effective and can be readily replicated in other jurisdictions to improve court appearance rates and reduce unnecessary system involvement.



Virtual Court Options

Virtual court options can significantly reduce failures to appear by helping individuals overcome common barriers such as lack of transportation, work conflicts, and childcare responsibilities. For example, El Paso, Texas experienced a 68% decline in missed court appearances after implementing virtual hearings.



CASE STUDY: Courtroom Audio Visual Project

In 2022, the NC Judicial Branch launched the Courtroom Audio Visual (CRAVE) Project. Through the CRAVE project, many courthouses throughout the state have the equipment needed to hold safe and secure remote court proceedings. This makes virtual court options a practical and scalable solution.

Transportation Assistance Programs

Transportation assistance programs can help address a common barrier to court appearance. Providing practical supports—such as transit access or other resources—can significantly improve attendance and reduce failures to appear.

CASE STUDY: Supportive Services in Orange County

Orange County offers supportive services including free bus passes and assistance coordinating and paying for rideshare options to court or the DMV. This approach helps ensure individuals can meet their legal obligations despite logistical challenges. Orange County also provides free legal representation to help restore driver's licenses for people who meet their program criteria.



Court Navigators and Wraparound Support

Court navigators and wraparound support provide individuals with the guidance, resources, and assistance needed to successfully attend court. Investing in peer support specialists, particularly those with lived experience, can improve appearance rates by increasing trust, reducing confusion around the legal process, and helping individuals address practical barriers.



CASE STUDY: Peer Support Specialists

Grassroots organizations along with agencies across the state, support individuals through peer mentorship and court navigation services. People with lived experience help participants prepare for court, access needed resources, coordinate transportation, and better understand the court process. Through these efforts, they play a critical role in ensuring

individuals can attend their hearings and meet court requirements.



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