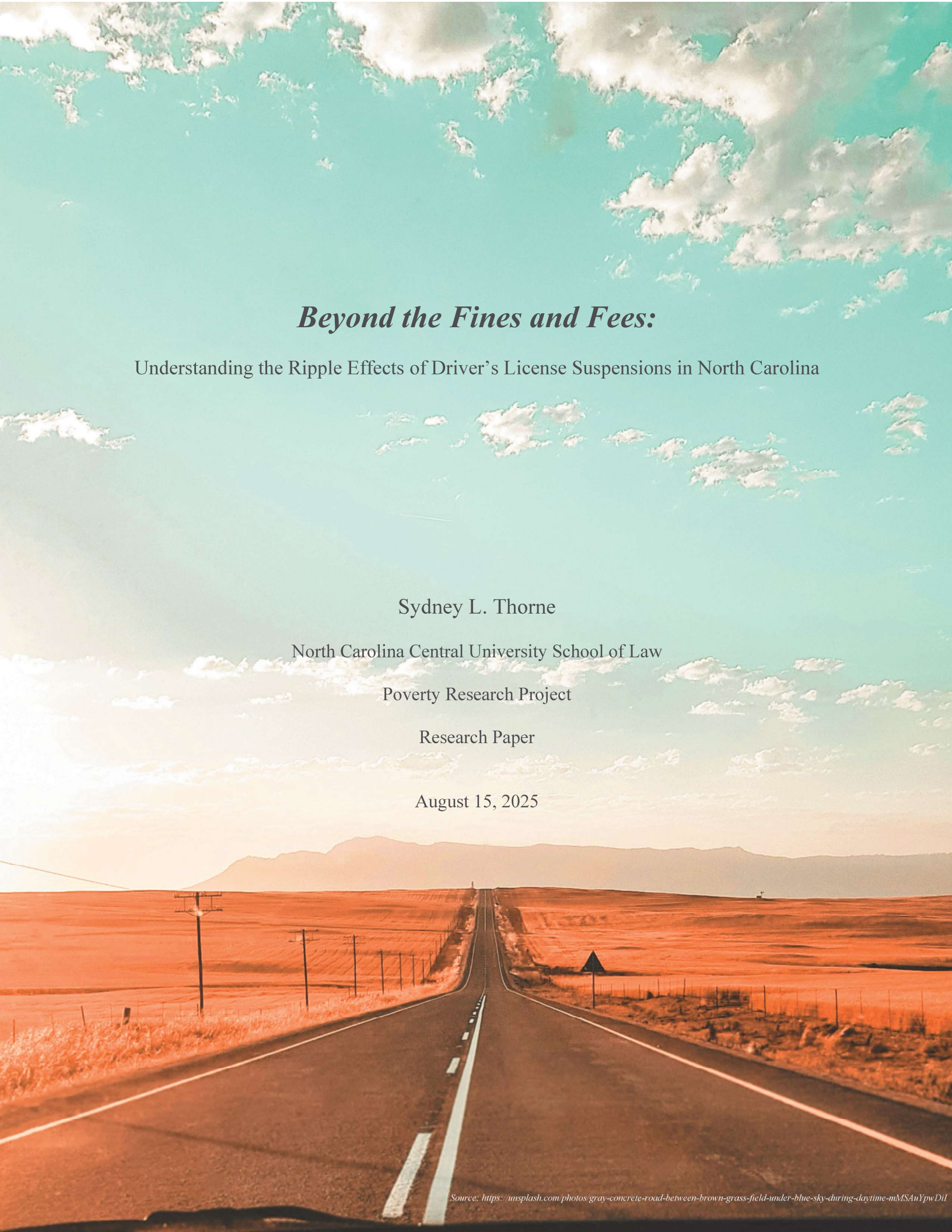




Beyond the Fines and Fees:

Understanding the Ripple Effects of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In North Carolina, more than 1.2 million driver's licenses are currently suspended, not due to dangerous driving but because of unpaid court fines and fees (Crozier & Garrett, 2019). North Carolina law requires the state Department of Motor Vehicles to suspend the license of anyone who fails to pay their court debt or fails to appear in court.

For many, the loss of a license is not just an inconvenience; it is a life-altering barrier that can lead to job loss, missed medical appointments, inability to take children to school and other individual, familial and community harms. According to the North Carolina Pro Bono Center, a statewide legal organization that runs a driver's license restoration project, their "clients are typically living in poverty and often seek help years after their license is suspended" (A. Logan, interview with author, July 15, 2025). In the meantime, life does not stop. People still need to get to work to make money, buy groceries, and care for their families. "Without viable alternatives, many continue to drive on a suspended license, risking being pulled over again and charged with driving while license revoked"—a misdemeanor that carries its own punishment, including more court debt (W. Carpenter, interview with author, July 17, 2025). This is how the vicious cycle deepens: without the money to pay existing fines and fees and without a valid license to travel to court, individuals face ongoing financial penalties—and even the threat of jail time—without a realistic path to reinstatement.

Informational interviews reveal that North Carolina's driver's license suspensions trap thousands in a cycle of poverty, forcing impossible choices between breaking the law to work or sacrificing income, education, and healthcare. Inconsistent county procedures, steep fines, and limited legal aid compounds the problem, while existing programs struggle to meet the needs. Without bold, statewide reform, these suspensions will continue to punish poverty rather than promote justice.

This paper presents the findings from those interviews, highlights common themes such as barriers to legal representation, the consequences of suspended licenses, current reform efforts, and offers proposed solutions and recommendations for change.

II. RESEARCH PURPOSE & APPROACH

After completing my first year of law school at the North Carolina Central University School of Law, I wanted to spend my summer sharpening my research and writing skills in a meaningful way. I was fortunate to receive the opportunity to work with the NCCU Law Poverty Research Project, focusing on the issue of driver's license suspensions.

Before beginning this project, I never realized that failing to pay a traffic ticket could result in a suspended license, nor did I understand the scale of the problem or the ripple effects it creates. Such suspensions often trap people in a cycle of hardship. Without a license, they cannot drive to work. Without work, they cannot earn money. Without money, they cannot pay the fines and fees needed to restore their license. Breaking this cycle is nearly impossible without outside help.

Because much of the existing research on this topic is data-focused and lacks personal narratives, I decided to take a more human-centered approach. My ultimate objective was to identify gaps in existing legal aid and policy, and to highlight solutions that could be implemented at both the local and statewide levels to reduce the harm caused by license suspensions. I conducted nine informational interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives from the NC Pro Bono Resource Center, the DEAR Program, the NC Justice Center, Benevolence Farm, private law firms, a sitting judge, and individuals directly impacted by license suspensions. Using a semi-structured format allowed participants to share personal stories while also providing context on systemic barriers.

These interviews were supplemented with legal research, policy analysis, and a review of recent legislative developments in other states. This research is part of a growing conversation about the disproportionate impact of driver's license suspensions on low-income communities. By amplifying human stories alongside data, this paper aims to bridge the gap between statistical analysis and lived experiences.

III. OVERVIEW OF DRIVER'S LICENSE SUSPENSIONS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Over 1.2 million individuals have active driver's license suspensions in North Carolina. These suspensions primarily result from a failure to pay traffic fines and fees (FTP) or failure to appear in court (FTA). FTP often occurs when individuals cannot afford court-imposed fines, while FTA may result from scheduling conflicts, lack of notice, or transportation barriers. These administrative penalties affect nearly 1 in 7 adult drivers in the state, and this widespread problem does not affect all residents equally (Boughton, 2021). The harshest consequences tend to fall on individuals already suffering from economic and social disadvantages, such as low-income residents and minority communities of color (DRIVING INJUSTICE, n.d.). For many individuals, the inability to pay a fine or appear in court is not a reflection of disregard for the law, but rather a result of unstable work schedules, lack of transportation, childcare responsibilities, or financial insecurity. Once their license is suspended, people are often caught in a vicious cycle of debt and legal consequences. They may continue to drive out of necessity to make it to work or other essential obligations, risking further penalties or even incarceration.

For reinstatement of a driver's license, individuals must pay fees exceeding \$100, appear in multiple courts if they have suspensions in more than one county, and then comply with the administrative steps through the DMV (NCDOT, 2025). The complexity of the system and the variation in how the courts and DMVs handle suspensions result in confusion, defeat, and prolonged suspensions.

License suspensions extend beyond mobility; they reinforce cycles of poverty. Losing the legal ability to drive limits access to employment, healthcare, education, essential services, and stifles the economy. This burden falls disproportionately on minority communities, deepening existing disparities in income, housing stability, and criminal justice outcomes. Addressing this

issue is not only about individual hardship but also about ensuring equity and fairness in North Carolina's legal system. Without targeted reforms, these suspensions will continue to undermine workforce participation and perpetuate economic inequality across our state.

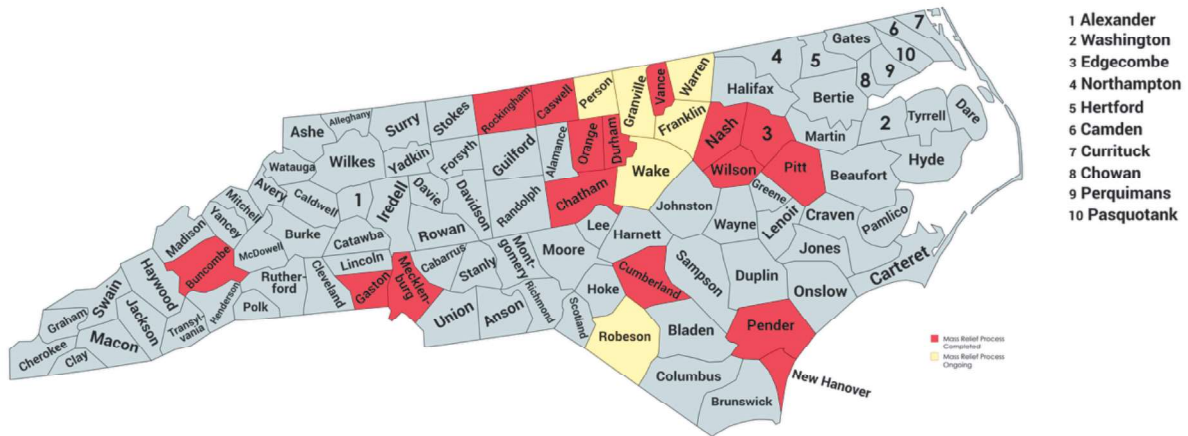
IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Over the summer, I conducted several informational interviews and attended community meetings to gather stories, experiences, and different perspectives on driver's license suspensions in North Carolina. Through conversations with attorneys, a sitting judge, non-profit organizers, and individuals directly affected, multiple common themes emerged. This section summarizes those findings in the following categories: challenges in legal representation, barriers created by suspended licenses, ongoing efforts to address the issue, and important perspectives that shape the broad conversation.

A. Challenges in Legal Representation

The first issue that arose in my discussions was the challenge in receiving and providing legal representation. Legal representation means having someone act on your behalf in legal matters, typically a lawyer or attorney who represents you in court or during legal proceedings (Legal Representative, 2025). In my interviews with the NC Pro Bono Resource Center, a statewide initiative designed to help lawyers in fulfilling their professional obligation to provide free legal services to those who cannot afford them (*Driver's License Restoration Project* – NC PBR Center, 2025), I learned that the individuals working on this issue wear many hats. Their work includes “mass debt relief efforts, writing advice letters, and individual representation on 415 motions” (M. Martie, interview with author, July 15, 2025). While the NC Pro Bono Resource Center cannot track how many clients have had their licenses restored, “since 2020, they have sent 9,754 license restoration advice letters” (M. Martie, interview with author, July 15, 2025). The NC Pro Bono Resource Center has completed mass debt relief in several counties including Durham, Orange, and Mecklenburg, and is currently working on similar efforts in Wake, Robeson, and Chatham (see map below provided by the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center).

North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center Mass Debt Relief Map (2025)



To date, the NC Pro Bono Resource Center has completed **58,000** cases (shown in **red**) where fines and fees have been forgiven through this mass relief program, and there are about **72,000** cases pending in the counties shown in **yellow**.

The NC Pro Bono Resource Center’s biggest challenge in sustaining these efforts is not a lack of volunteer interest from the legal profession, but the need for more staff to provide the expertise, continuity, and coordination necessary to keep services accurate, efficient, and responsive. “To sustain and grow our impact, we need increased, reliable funding for additional staff positions that can train and supervise volunteers, manage program operations, and develop new initiatives” (M. Martie, interview with author, July 15, 2025).

Another challenge that emerged in the discussion was the logistics of legal representation. In North Carolina, “we have 100 different counties and 100 different ways of doing things” as described by Judge Maris, a District Court Judge in Durham (interview with author, August 13, 2025). Some individuals may have their licenses suspended in five or six different counties simply from driving across county lines. This creates a daunting and complex process for both attorneys and affected individuals. From the individual’s perspective, navigating varying county procedures for paying fines and fees, attending court proceedings, and arranging public transportation to

appear in court can be stressful, confusing, and discouraging. After speaking with a private practice pro bono attorney, his perspective was that “traveling several hours for a 15-minute hearing in different counties can be difficult to justify, making it harder to recruit volunteers to aid in this effort” (J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025). “In these rural areas, there might be limited private bar presence and few attorneys available to take on these cases” (J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025). “Increasing the number of pro bono volunteers who are willing to travel or creating a universal process to submit appeals without requiring in-person hearings could significantly reduce this challenge” (J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025).

The final challenge that emerged from my informational interviews was the ability to afford and access legal services. Most people who end up in this situation are typically already facing other hardships, whether that be financial, health-related, or both. In one interview, an individual described how, after being released from incarceration, she could not afford the assistance needed to restore her license without the help of a non-profit organization. This organization, Benevolence Farm, supports formerly incarcerated women and gender-expansive people and provides housing, employment, and other essential services until they can get back on their feet. In this case, Benevolence Farm provided a loan to cover the individual’s fines and fees, as well as shuttled her to courthouses across multiple counties where she had received tickets. “Without this assistance, I would not have been able to reinstate my license” (*Anonymous*, interview with author, July 30, 2025). This illustrates a broader challenge: very few nonprofit organizations are willing or able to provide this level of support, and those like “Benevolence Farm often operate at capacity despite relying only on word-of-mouth referrals” (K. Powers, interview with author, July 29, 2025).

B. Barriers Created by Suspended Licenses

Building on the challenges in legal representation, the barriers caused by a suspended license ripple throughout a person's life, family, and community. My informational interviews revealed the difficult tradeoffs people make to pay fines and fees, leading to unintended negative consequences that likely were never the state's intention.

During my informational interviews, several stories stood out as stark examples of how a suspended license can upend lives. One woman, pregnant and without reliable transportation, debated skipping critical prenatal appointments out of fear of being stopped and charged for driving with a suspended license. A single mother of three, working to improve her future through education, considered dropping out of school and using her tuition money to pay court fines and fees. Another woman, on the verge of acquiring

her commercial driver's license, was almost denied the opportunity she had worked for because of the threat of a suspended license. One individual, too afraid to risk driving, lost their job entirely and was forced onto government assistance. A man had long delayed moving out of state because he couldn't risk leaving the friends and family who gave him rides. A young chef's position depended on picking up food deliveries for the restaurant; without a license, he faced losing his job and his livelihood. Each of these stories reflect a hard truth, that losing the legal right to drive can not only strip away mobility, but also your opportunities and hope.

A Dream Job in Jeopardy

Barry, a young chef had just earned his associate's degree from culinary school and was still paying off his education when he landed his dream job at a local restaurant. It was the kind of opportunity that could launch his career. The position required a valid driver's license because the chef was responsible for picking up food deliveries from various stores, yet his license had been suspended.

Fortunately, the restaurant allowed him a short provisional period to get it reinstated. During that time, he worked hard to make the logistics work, arranging for others to pick up the supplies. He knew that if he could not resolve the problem in time, he would lose the opportunity he had worked so hard to achieve.

*J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025
(Name changed for anonymity)*

Life After License Restoration

With the help of Benevolence Farm, Lisa paid nearly \$2,000 in fines and fees to restore her license, working part time and repaying the organization from each paycheck. The program's housing and support made it possible to clear the debt within a year, something that would have been impossible without that safety net.

However, getting the license back did not end the struggle. Lisa discovered 16 points on her record from old charges that should have been dismissed, which pushed her car insurance to more than \$300 a month. Even after the charges were reversed, she was locked into the high rate for months. This experience showed that for many, the financial and legal burdens continue long after a license is restored.

*Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025
(Name changed for anonymity)*

These are not minor inconveniences; they are life-altering tradeoffs that keep people trapped in poverty. I do not believe the state of North Carolina intended for these outcomes: a woman risking her health and her baby's health, a parent sacrificing education, a worker losing employment and turning to welfare, or a young professional pushed further into financial instability. Finally, even after a license is reinstated, the consequences can linger for months or even years. These stories should serve as a warning to the state to reexamine whether the intended consequences of suspending licenses for

failure to pay or failure to appear align with the devastating realities people face.

C. Ongoing Efforts Underway

Thankfully, there are individuals and organizations across North Carolina working to address the issue of license suspensions and fight for meaningful change. As noted earlier, the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center helps individuals navigate the suspension process by preparing advice letters, advocating for mass debt relief, and providing individual representation through 415 motions requesting fee waivers. They report a "100 percent success rate in getting fines and fees reduced by filing the 415" (M. Martie, interview with author, July 15, 2025).

The DEAR Durham Program (Durham Expunction & Reinstatement Program) offers "free legal relief to Durham residents who cannot afford attorneys, assisting with expunging charges, clearing convictions, and restoring suspended or revoked licenses" (DEAR, 2019). Benevolence

Farm, as discussed earlier, addresses license issues for its members when they arise but focuses more broadly on supporting formerly incarcerated women through housing, employment, and reentry services. The North Carolina Justice Center “works to reduce and ultimately eliminate poverty by ensuring low-income, working-class, and minority communities have the resources needed to move from poverty to economic security” (Welcome to LawHelpNC.org, 2016). Additionally, the N.C. Fair Chance Act is a “partnership between the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, the North Carolina Justice Center, and district attorneys across the state, which helps drivers remove minor charges and unpaid fines from their records, thereby lifting suspensions and restoring licenses” (About - NC Fair Chance, 2022).

While these programs have accomplished meaningful results, each faces significant challenges, such as limited resources that restrict their reach. A coordinated, statewide solution is needed to address the root cause to ensure equitable access to relief.

D. Important Perspectives

There are three key perspectives that I want the reader to take away from this paper. The first, is to recognize that “the justice system is functioning in a harmful way” (L. Webb, interview with author, August 6, 2025). The most critical step in addressing any problem is identifying what is wrong. People should not have to make life-altering tradeoffs just to pay fines and fees from a missed traffic ticket or court date.

Second, the loss of a driver’s license is often a symptom of deeper challenges such as mental illness, physical illness, job loss, or other personal hardships. For many, it is “one of several problems they are navigating, but it adds an additional layer of complexity and hardship where the costs far outweigh any benefits” (J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025).

Finally, “taking someone’s license is like cutting off their arms and legs, setting them outside the courthouse, and telling them to run” (Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025). “The justice system is crippling people, then asking them to be productive” (Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025).

“A suspended license affects not only the driver but also their children” (Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025). “Research shows that children raised in homes impacted by poverty, addiction, divorce, or homelessness have higher Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) scores, and those with high ACE scores are three times more likely to develop mental health disorders or struggle with addiction as adults” (Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025). “By limiting the opportunities of parents through license suspension, we pass the ripple effects on to the next generation, compounding societal problems rather than solving them” (Anonymous, interview with author, July 30, 2025).

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, North Carolina must address the harmful cycle created by suspending driver's licenses for failure to pay or failure to appear. Real change begins with shifting hearts and minds, amplifying the human stories behind the data, and pushing for legislative reform. (L. Webb, interview with author, August 6, 2025).

Key Recommendations:

- “Assess a person's financial situation and their ability to pay before imposing the fees to make the punishment fairer and more equitable” (W. Carpenter, interview with author, July 17, 2025).
- “Implement universal relief or a statewide initiative instead of piecemeal solutions to waive the driver's license suspensions and reinstate them for those unable to pay” (J. Jolley, interview with author, July 23, 2025).
- “Create an automatic notice system that sends individuals a link via email or text to the jurisdiction where their license is suspended, along with clear instructions on how to file, get on the docket, and resolve the issue before the suspension takes effect” (Judge A. Maris, interview with author, August 13, 2025).
- Support and lobby lawmakers to pass reforms similar to North Carolina House Bill 980. This bill “would prohibit suspending driver's licenses for unpaid traffic-related fines, fees, or failure to appear, immediately reinstating licenses in such cases and requiring courts to offer a text-based reminder system for managing related obligations” (Webb, 2025).
- Follow the lead of other states like Virginia and California, which have passed legislation preventing individuals from losing their license for failure to pay.

- Increase resources for existing programs like the NC Pro Bono Resource Center, DEAR Durham, and the NC Justice Center to expand their reach and reduce case backlogs.

By implementing these changes, North Carolina can break the cycle of poverty and legal hardship caused by suspended licenses.

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