

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

The Scale of the Problem



Poverty
Research Project,
The Justice Institute

North Carolina Central
University Law School

February 2026

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
HOW LICENSE SUSPENSION HAPPENS	4
SUSPENSION IS THE PRICE FOR “DRIVING WHILE BROKE”	5
LICENSE SUSPENSION IS A WIDESPREAD PROBLEM IN NORTH CAROLINA	8
License Suspension Over Time	8
License Suspension by North Carolina County	10
CONSEQUENCES OF LICENSE SUSPENSION	13
THE PATH FORWARD FOR NORTH CAROLINA	13
REFERENCES	17
APPENDIX A	20

Cover image credit: OpenAI, *North Carolina Driver’s License with “Denied” Stamp*, AI-generated image created using ChatGPT, 2026

Acknowledgments

The Poverty Research Project is grateful to research assistant Sydney Thorne, the Fines and Fees Coalition, the individuals and organizations who help drivers with suspended licenses, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation. We are especially thankful for the people who took time to share their experiences and observations with us.

While many people were involved in the creation of this report, the Poverty Research Project is solely responsible for any errors.

Introduction

North Carolina is plagued by an epidemic of driver’s license suspension. These suspensions are not penalties for dangerous driving. They happen when drivers don’t pay their court debt or appear in court, often in minor traffic cases.¹ Overwhelmingly, those who lose their license are barely getting by; license suspensions kick people who are already down.

Most people do not knowingly or willfully disregard court orders. Instead, economic hardship intervenes to make compliance impossible. When a driver fails to pay or appear, the suspension that follows is automatic, with no allowance made for matters beyond the driver’s control. License reinstatement is difficult, costly and time-consuming, and suspensions can last years or even decades. What starts as an administrative slap on the wrist turns into a devastating and ongoing punishment.

This report is the first of a two-part analysis examining the scale and impact of license suspension in North Carolina. It documents the extraordinary prevalence of suspensions for failure to pay court debt and failure to appear, analyzing trends over time and across counties. The second report explores the consequences of suspension, drawing on the lived experiences of affected drivers and the perspectives of attorneys and advocates who work alongside them.

The fact that most suspensions arise from low level traffic and motor vehicle cases means they deserve special scrutiny. These cases account for the largest share of all court activity in North Carolina and represent the most common way people encounter law enforcement and the legal system.² The sheer volume of these cases, the number of people they touch, and the immense scale of the suspensions that follow, gives them a significance unmatched by other types of cases.

¹ Grunberg and Garrett, “North Carolina Driver’s License Suspension Dashboard.” 2/25/26 11:53:00 PM According to the Dashboard, minor traffic offenses account for 89.9% of failure to appear and failure to pay suspensions.

² Between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024, traffic misdemeanors accounted for 72.3% of criminal cases filed in the state’s district courts. Almost all (98.5%) infractions filed in district court were for motor vehicle offenses (N.C.G.S. Chapter 20). These two categories dwarfed all others in district court and accounted for 61.1% of all district court cases filed in 2023-2024. North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts, *Statistical and Operational Report of North Carolina Trial Courts, 2023-2024* and *Infraction Case Activity Report FY2023-24*.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

Suspensions at this scale drain state resources, hobble the efficiency of state agencies, weaken the economy, and—most importantly—inflict lasting and debilitating harm on hundreds of thousands of ordinary North Carolinians who are simply trying to get by.

How License Suspension Happens

The most common way a driver’s license is suspended in North Carolina is when a driver charged with a motor vehicle offense **fails to pay (FTP)** money owed the court or **fails to appear (FTA)** in court for a scheduled hearing or trial.³ Motor vehicle offenses include both traffic safety offenses like speeding and administrative traffic offenses like expired registration tags. Many offenses, like failing to wear a seat belt or failing to signal when turning, are infractions—minor, non-criminal violations.

If a person who fails to pay or appear doesn’t resolve the issue within the statutorily defined grace period, the court issues an FTA or FTP suspension and assesses an additional fee. The court then notifies the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) of the suspension. Unless the driver takes action—by paying all money owed and/or going to court within the time allotted—the DMV automatically suspends their license.⁴

Once a license is suspended, a driver can’t drive legally until they take all the steps required to have their license reinstated. This is a complex and intimidating legal process that most people are forced to navigate without the assistance of a lawyer. A driver must obtain and make sense of their court record, determine where and how to request a hearing, and arrange multiple trips to every county where a suspension occurred. They must pay all outstanding court debt or, if they know how, ask a judge to waive it.

If they successfully resolve their suspension(s) with the court system, drivers must still seek reinstatement through the DMV, which imposes its own fees and administrative requirements.⁵ Drivers must also maintain or reacquire vehicle insurance and registration. Taken together, this

³ N.C.G.S. 20-24.1(a)(2) and 20-24.1(a)(1).

⁴ N.C.G.S. 20-24.1(a).

⁵ See N.C. Department of Transportation, “Driver License Restoration, <https://www.ncdot.gov/dmv/license-id/license-suspension/Pages/driver-license-restoration.aspx>.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

cumbersome and costly process—detailed in the second report—keeps North Carolinians trapped in suspension for years.

What Are Court Costs and Fees?

In addition to fines for the underlying violation, a driver must pay court costs. Court costs are administrative fees that start at roughly \$200 but can go higher depending on the details of the case. The fee for an FTP or FTA is assessed in addition to these court costs and fines. An FTP triggers a \$50 fee; an FTA is \$200. In combination, court costs and suspension fees can far exceed the original fine. A \$15 speeding ticket can become a \$400 court debt in the blink of an eye.

Drivers often accrue multiple suspensions, and a license suspension can lead to other charges. In this way, drivers can end up owing thousands of dollars in fees, locking them into long-term license suspension.

Suspension Is the Price for “Driving While Broke”

The connection between failure to pay and poverty is straightforward: drivers who can’t afford their court debt won’t be able to pay it. The connection between failure to appear and poverty is less immediately obvious, but FTAs are often rooted in economic hardship as well.

To appear in court, a person must first know the date of their hearing or that the suspension is pending. Yet a sizable share of individuals may never receive this information. Researchers at Duke University mailed surveys to Wake County drivers with suspended licenses using the home addresses on file with the DMV (the same addresses used by the courts). A full third of the surveys were returned as undeliverable, suggesting that a significant share of official notices never reach their intended recipients.⁶ Studies from other jurisdictions have also found that mailed notices are an unreliable method of communication.⁷

⁶ Garrett et al., “Undeliverable: Suspended Driver’s Licenses and the Problem of Notice,” 191–92.

⁷ Crime and Justice Institute, *What Really Prevents Court Appearance? Survey Findings From People Who Failed to Appear in Two Counties*; Dindial et al., *Reckless Lawmaking: How Debt-Based Driver’s License Suspension Laws Impose Harm and Waste Resources*; Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law and Fines and Fees Justice Center, *Debt Sentence: How Fines and Fees Hurt Working Families*.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

One powerful explanation for the failure of mailed notices is the length of time it takes to resolve a case. Cases can stretch on for months, or even years. A lot can happen in a person’s life in that time, including a change of address.

This is especially true for low-income North Carolinians experiencing housing instability. Statewide, rent is unaffordable for 82% of renters earning less than \$50,000.⁸ Whether due to eviction, rising costs or other crises, low-income households may have to move frequently and unexpectedly. They double up with friends or family, couch-surf, rely on short-term rentals, stay in a shelter, or make other temporary arrangements. People who can’t tell you where they will be living in a week can’t provide a permanent forwarding address.⁹ It’s hardly surprising then that nonappearance rates increase as cases drag on.¹⁰

Transportation barriers also cause people to miss their court date.¹¹ A person summoned to court must appear at the courthouse in the county where the charge originated. North Carolina is geographically large and public transit is limited, especially across counties. The courthouse might be in another town, or halfway across the state, yet no accommodations exist to help people get there.

Many drivers charged with a motor vehicle offense don’t have a valid license or a personal vehicle that complies with regulatory requirements. The two misdemeanors most closely associated with nonappearance are Driving While Licenses Revoked and Expired Registration Card/Tag.¹² In the first, defendants are prohibited from driving at all; in the second, they may not legally operate their own vehicle. In addition, many poor and near-poor households don’t have reliable access to a car—because it’s shared with other people, in need of repair or simply out of gas—leaving them with no practical way to reach the courthouse.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2024 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S2503.

⁹ Desmond et al., “Forced Relocation and Residential Instability among Urban Renters”; Kang, “Severe and Persistent Housing Instability.”

¹⁰ Statewide Court Appearance Project Committee, *Statewide Court Appearance Project Final Report: Recommendations to Address Court Appearance Issues in North Carolina*, 12.

¹¹ Crime and Justice Institute, *What Really Prevents Court Appearance? Survey Findings From People Who Failed to Appear in Two Counties*; McCoy et al., *Removing Barriers to Pretrial Appearance: Lessons Learned from Tulsa County, Oklahoma, and Hennepin County, Minnesota*.

¹² Statewide Court Appearance Project Committee, *Statewide Court Appearance Project Final Report: Recommendations to Address Court Appearance Issues in North Carolina*, 14.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

Court scheduling practices can compound these challenges. Many courts require people to arrive in the morning and wait for their case, possibly for hours. Sometimes the court runs out of time and cases are continued until another date. Between travel time and time spent at the courthouse, a single appearance can take all day—and might have to be repeated. This isn’t a realistic expectation for people juggling multiple responsibilities or working in jobs with unpredictable schedules and no paid time off. The burden falls especially hard on lower wage workers who less likely to have employment benefits or access to resources like paid childcare.

Failure to appear is also closely linked to failure to pay, and many drivers have suspensions for both.¹³ Drivers who can afford their fines and fees don’t have to go to court. They can pay online to dispose of the matter. Those who can’t pay—the same individuals who are most likely to incur an FTP—are required to appear in court, exposing them to the risk of an FTA. People may also make the understandable decision to skip court if they know they can’t pay. Why bother showing up, the rationale goes, if you can’t do what the court is going to order? The FTP-FTA relationship also goes the other way: the \$200 fee for failing to appear increases the total amount owed, making a future failure to pay more likely.

An attorney we interviewed described the economic injustice at the heart of license suspension. People with money, he explained, don’t worry about suspension. **“If you get a speeding ticket, you hire an attorney, you pay them. It’s an annoyance, but it’s not a full step back and a problem.”**¹⁴ Another attorney provided her own blunt assessment of the unequal impact of suspension.

It is not fair that a person that has a large amount of disposable income each month can just swipe their card and go home and do everything that they would ordinarily do on a Tuesday. Whereas a person who literally has no disposable income and doesn't have the \$200 or whatever dollars ends up in a situation where unless they can figure out how they can come up with [it], they are no longer going to be able to drive to work to make more money to pay this, and are also charged additional fees because they can’t pay it.

¹³ See Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law, *Driving Injustice: Consequences and Disparities in North Carolina Criminal Legal and Traffic Debt*, 8.

¹⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations are from interviews conducted by the Poverty Research Fund.

License Suspension Is a Widespread Problem in North Carolina

As of November 2024, the North Carolina DMV reported more than **1.2 million** active license suspensions for failure to appear (FTA), nearly **416,000** suspensions for failure to pay (FTP) and over **581,000** suspensions for both FTA and FTP.¹⁵ Added together, North Carolinians are burdened with over **2.8 million active suspensions for failure to appear or failure to pay.**¹⁶

These figures represent the number of suspensions, not the number of people with a suspended license. Many drivers have multiple suspensions, often from different counties and from different years. The scale of the problem is still stunning, however, when considering the number of people with suspensions. According to estimates from Duke University’s Wilson Center for Science and Justice, as of January 2025 **approximately 900,000 North Carolinians have a license suspension due to an FTA or FTP in a traffic case.**¹⁷ If these individuals suddenly regained their licenses, they would swell the ranks of licensed drivers in the state by roughly 11%.¹⁸

License Suspension Over Time

As shown in Figure 1, the number of FTA suspensions remained relatively stable until the mid-2010s. Suspensions rose steadily through 2019, dropped briefly in 2020, and then jumped sharply in the following years. FTP suspensions followed a similar though less dramatic arc. After climbing rapidly in 2021, the number of suspensions for both FTA and FTP plateaued in 2023 and declined slightly in 2024. All three categories of suspension have seen a dramatic rise in the past ten years.

¹⁵ The “both” category represents FTA and FTP suspensions that occur when both an FTA and an FTP suspension stem from the same case in the same month.

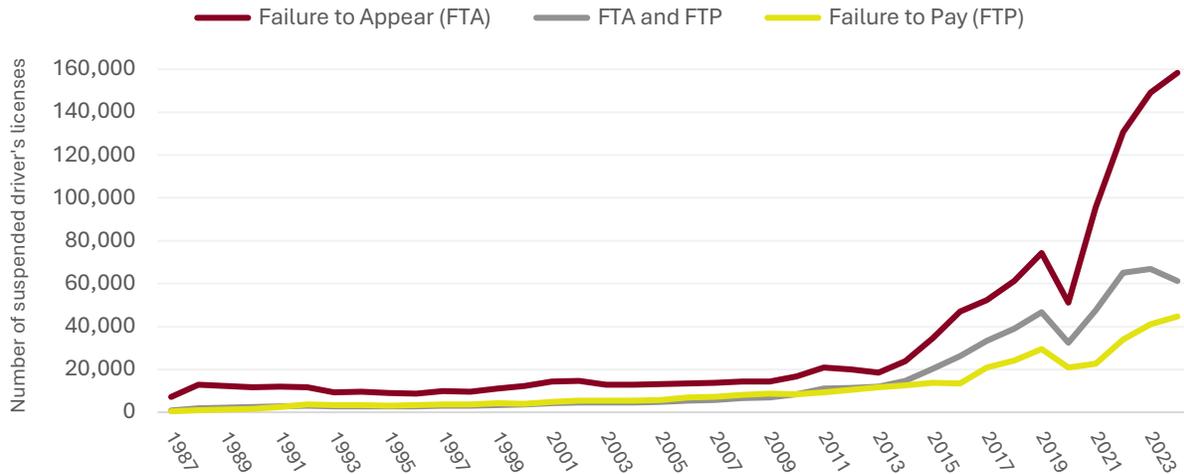
¹⁶ North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles Data Extract, final version received June 4, 2025, on file with the author. The “both” category is disaggregated to produce the total number of suspensions. Unless otherwise specified, the following discussion and charts are Poverty Research Project analysis of North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles Data Extract.

¹⁷ Grunberg and Garrett, “North Carolina Driver’s License Suspension Dashboard.”

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Transportation, “Licensed Drivers by State, Sex, and Age Group, 1994 – 2023,” https://data.transportation.gov/Roadways-and-Bridges/Licensed-Drivers-by-State-Sex-and-Age-Group-1994-2/xfkb-3bxx/data_preview.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

Figure 1. Driver’s License Suspension in North Carolina by Reason for Suspension



Thousands of active suspensions in North Carolina are now decades old. **More than 235,000 suspensions—8% of all active suspensions—occurred before 2000 and over 535,000 (19%) occurred before 2010.** These numbers support research showing that individuals who can afford to resolve their suspension do so quickly, while those who can’t remain trapped for years.¹⁹ These suspensions, intended as short-term enforcement mechanism, are instead long-lasting and life-altering punishment.

Table 1. Suspension by Year

Year of Suspension	Number of Failure to Appear (FTA)	Number of Failure to Pay (FTP)	FTAs and FTPs in “Both” Category	Total	As a Percentage of All Years
1980s	32,077	2,623	9,568	44,268	1.6%
Pre-2000	133,730	34,574	66,980	235,284	8.4%
Pre-2010	269,668	96,889	168,678	535,235	19.1%
Pre-2020	640,358	251,407	614,788	1,506,553	53.7%
Total Suspensions All Years	1,227,356	415,431	1,162,826	2,805,613	100.0%

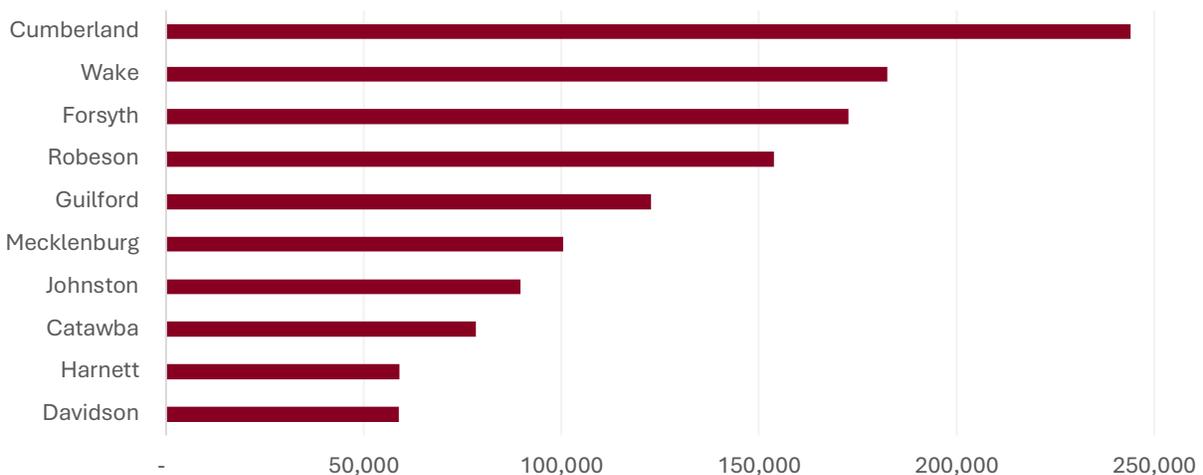
¹⁹ Crozier et al., *The Explosion of Unpaid Criminal Fines and Fees in North Carolina*, 9–10. The Wilson Center at Duke Law found that it took over 4 years on average to resolve an FTA, and about 2.5 years to resolve an FTP. See, Grunberg and Garrett, “North Carolina Driver’s License Suspension Dashboard.” See also, Crozier et al., *Understanding the Impact of Driver’s License Suspension: Lay Opinion in Impacted and Non-Impacted Populations*, 12 (a survey of suspended drivers found a mean suspension length of approximately 9.8 years and a median of 7 years).

License Suspension by North Carolina County

The number of FTA and FTP suspensions varies considerably by county.²⁰ Wake, Mecklenburg, Guilford and Forsyth—North Carolina’s four most populous counties—rank among the counties with the highest number of suspensions (Figure 2). This makes sense: these counties have the largest number of driving-age residents, and they attract thousands of nonresident commuters and visitors every day.²¹

However, population alone does not explain the number of suspensions in a county. Cumberland County has roughly one-third of Wake County’s population but 61,000 more suspensions. Several of the state’s major urban counties—including Durham, Buncombe and New Hanover—are absent from this list. Instead, several mid-sized counties, including Robeson, Johnston, Catawba, Harnett and Davidson, have an outsized number of suspensions relative to the size of their population.²²

Figure 2. Counties with Most Suspensions



The counties with the fewest suspensions are among North Carolina’s least populated. Yet here too, the number of suspensions doesn’t align with population size. Tyrrell and Hyde Counties have the smallest number of residents 18 years and older in the state—2,816 and 3,780 respectively—but Tyrrell has four times as many suspensions as Hyde. Similarly, several counties

²⁰ Suspensions are by county where the suspension took place, not county of residence.

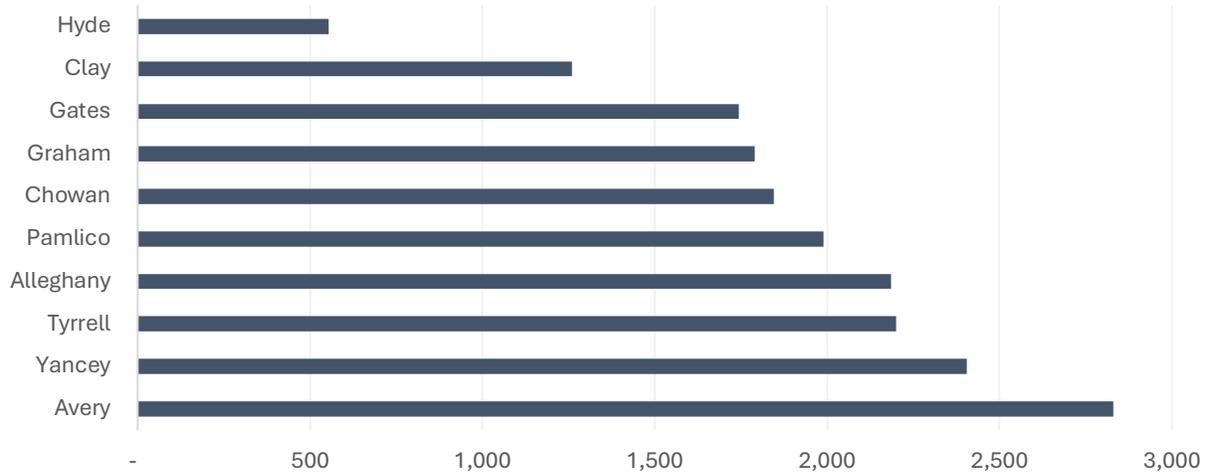
²¹ For example, more than 420,000 people work in Mecklenburg County but don’t live there. U.S. Census Bureau, “OnTheMap,” <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>.

²² These numbers do not reflect mass relief efforts in progress in Robeson and Guilford counties.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

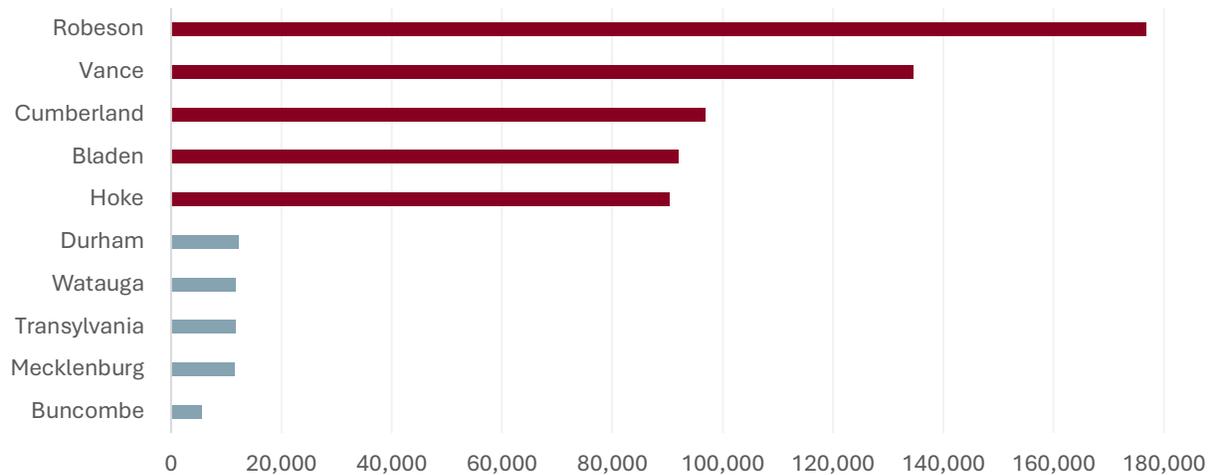
shown in Figure 3—Alleghany, Chowan, Yancey, Clay, Pamlico—have more adult residents but fewer suspensions than Camden, Washington and Jones, three sparsely populated rural counties that are not listed here because their suspension counts are disproportionately high.

Figure 3. Counties with Fewest Suspensions



Because some counties have many more suspensions than their population would indicate, and others have many fewer, the per capita suspension rate is a helpful way to identify outliers. Figure 4 shows the five counties with the highest and lowest per capita suspension rates. (A complete list of the number of suspensions and per capita rate by county is provided in Appendix A.)

Figure 4. Highest and Lowest Suspension Rates by County per 100,000 Residents



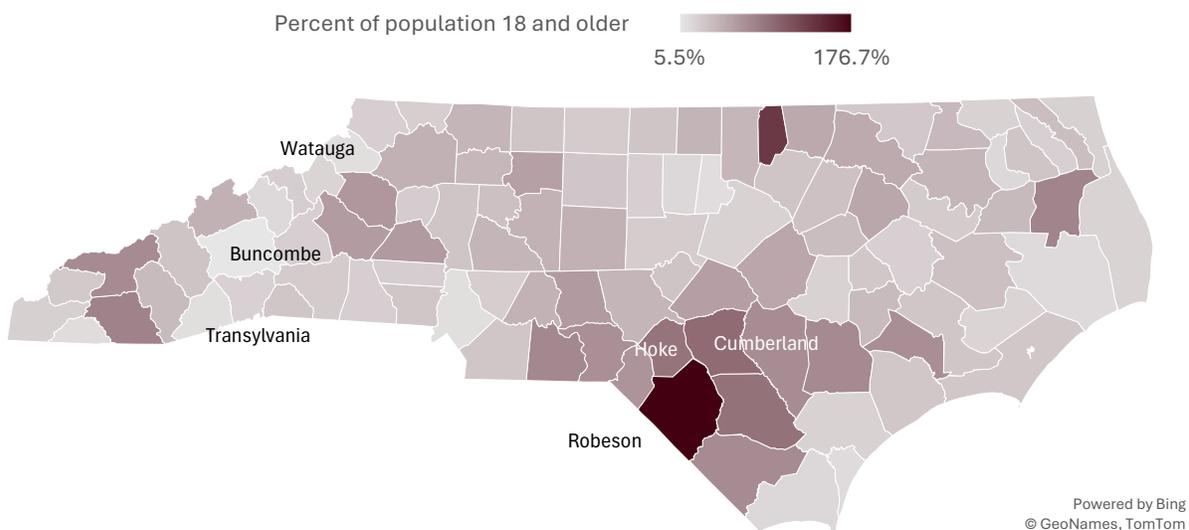
The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

In two counties—Robeson and Vance—the number of driver’s license suspensions exceeds the number of residents aged 18 or older. This doesn’t mean every adult in the county has a suspended license. Some residents undoubtedly have multiple suspensions; some suspensions belong to non-residents. **Nonetheless, these two counties, along with Cumberland, Bladen and Hoke, have per capita suspension rates from 2.6 to more than 5 times the state average.**

The gray bars in Figure 4 represent the counties with the lowest per capita suspension rates in the state. Although Mecklenburg and Durham have large numbers of suspensions in absolute terms, their per capita rates are relatively low. Buncombe County, the seventh most populated county in North Carolina, has the lowest suspension rate in the state.

These variations suggest that local characteristics—residents’ race and ethnicity, poverty levels, decisions made by local law enforcement or district attorneys, court practices, or other factors—influence suspension rates.²³ Both high- and low-rate counties also show some geographic clustering. Robeson, Cumberland and Hoke, three of the five counties with the highest suspension rates, are grouped together in the southeastern part of the state (Map 1). Watauga, Transylvania and Buncombe, three of the five counties with the lowest suspension rates, are all located in the mountain west.

Map 1. Suspension Rate by County



²³ Crozier and Garrett, “Driven to Failure: An Empirical Analysis of Driver’s License Suspension in North Carolina.”

Consequences of License Suspension

Behind these anonymous numbers are individual lives constrained and impoverished by license suspensions. Affluent people, as a rule, don't get their license suspended for FTA and FTP; these suspensions overwhelmingly hit people who are already facing tough circumstances. Suspensions make life harder. Job loss, reduced income, eviction and compromised health are common consequences. Ordinary activities—grocery shopping, running errands, attending religious services, going to class, or taking children on an outing—become fraught or undoable. A person without a license who is trying to keep their household afloat turns into a criminal every time they sit behind the wheel.

The ability to drive is fundamental to daily life, and many individuals with suspended licenses continue to drive out of necessity. If they are caught, they then incur new charges that can then generate new suspensions. Each encounter adds another layer to the stack of court debt and legal complications that must be resolved before reinstatement is possible, pushing the license farther out of reach.²⁴ The second report in this series explores in greater depth how suspension is both a cause and consequence of economic hardship.

The Path Forward for North Carolina

As these numbers make clear, driver's license suspension in North Carolina for failure to appear and failure to pay is pervasive. Hundreds of thousands of drivers, in every corner of the state, are burdened by millions of active suspensions. Most people living with a suspended license want to resolve it but can't, for reasons beyond their control. As one attorney told us, **"I deal with a lot of people who want to pay. They want to be able to drive legally, but they just don't have the money."**

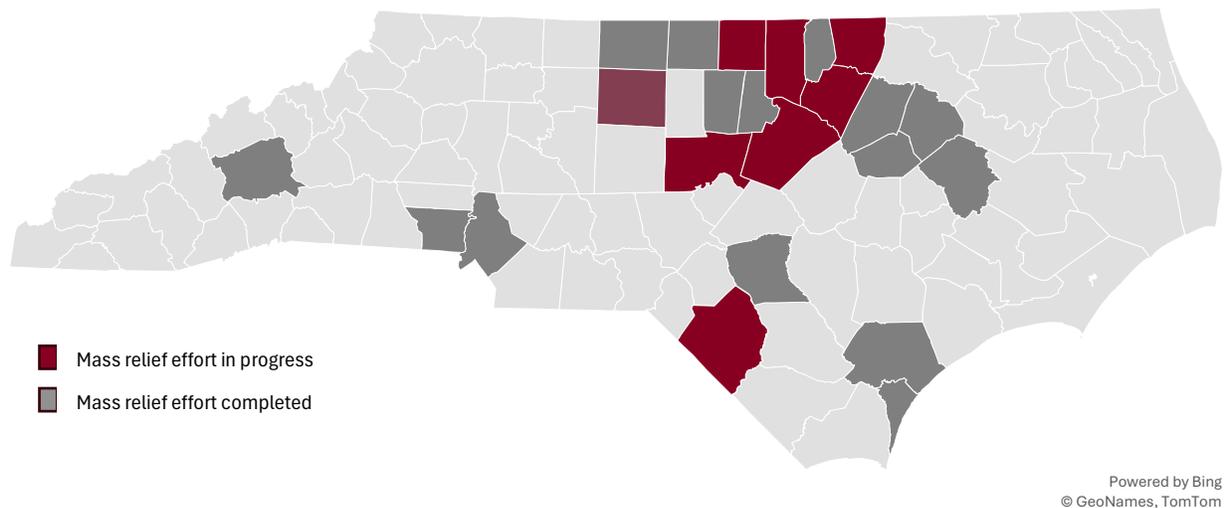
The scale of the problem puts it beyond the capacity of volunteer or pro bono programs to address. Still, in the absence of broader reform, these initiatives remain crucial. The Driver's

²⁴ For a discussion of consequences of suspension in North Carolina, see Crozier and Garrett, "Driven to Failure: An Empirical Analysis of Driver's License Suspension in North Carolina"; Crozier et al., *Understanding the Impact of Driver's License Suspension: Lay Opinion in Impacted and Non-Impacted Populations*; Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law and Fines and Fees Justice Center, *Debt Sentence: How Fines and Fees Hurt Working Families*; Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law, *Driving Injustice: Consequences and Disparities in North Carolina Criminal Legal and Traffic Debt*.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

License Restoration Project at the North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, for example, works with district attorneys to forgive traffic court costs and fees for people “with long-term license suspensions stemming from low-level traffic offenses.”²⁵ These county-wide mass relief efforts have created a path to license reinstatement for tens of thousands of drivers. Relief efforts have taken place in 23 counties across North Carolina, representing a geographically, demographically and politically diverse array of jurisdictions (Map 2).

Map 2. North Carolina Mass Relief Efforts by County



Source: North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, Driver’s License Restoration Project

Note: As of December 2025, the counties with completed relief efforts are Rockingham, Caswell, Vance, Orange, Durham, Chatham, Nash, Wilson, Edgecombe, Pitt, Cumberland, Pender, New Hanover, Mecklenburg, Gaston, and Buncombe. Mass relief efforts are in progress in Person, Granville Warren, Franklin, Wake, Guilford, and Robeson.

The Driver’s License Restoration Project also coordinates volunteer attorneys who draft advice letters for people with suspended licenses and assist individual clients seek judicial waiver of fines and fees they can’t afford. Local initiatives like Orange County’s Restoration Legal Counsel²⁶ and Legal Aid of North Carolina’s DEAR program (Durham Expunction and Restoration)²⁷ and Second Chance Wilmington²⁸ have helped thousands of residents with license suspensions.

²⁵ North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center, “Driver’s License Restoration Project,” <https://ncprobono.org/drive/>.

²⁶ Orange County Criminal Justice Resource Department, Restoration Legal Counsel, <https://www.orangecountync.gov/2301/Restoration-Legal-Counsel>.

²⁷ Durham Expunction and Restoration (DEAR), <https://www.deardurham.org/>.

²⁸ Second Chance Project, <https://legalaidnc.org/office/wilmington-second-chance-project/>.

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

As admirable as they are, these efforts can't help everyone. According to one longtime advocate, **"It feels like the need is always swallowing up the resources we have, even with those types of programs."** Not only is current demand overwhelming, but the pool of newly suspended drivers is growing larger. **"The problem is,"** noted one attorney, **"going forward, licenses are going to be suspended for the same reason. In addition to being retroactive—let's fix what the problem has created thus far—there has to be a proactive effort. Let's stop doing this."**

Mass relief efforts don't help everyone with a suspension, nor do they help with suspensions that occur after relief is granted. Most counties don't offer programs like those in Durham or Wilmington. Pro bono representation through the Driver's License Restoration Project is limited by attorney availability, especially in places with few local lawyers.

Beyond issues of capacity, these programs are limited in several other ways. For drivers with suspensions in more than one county, mass relief or pro bono assistance in a single jurisdiction is a helpful start but not a clean slate. Because a driver can't apply for license reinstatement with the DMV until *all* suspensions are resolved, partial relief leaves individuals vulnerable to getting pulled back into the suspension cycle all over again. As one lawyer described it,

The problem is, it's rare that I see a person that just has one suspension. For people that live in the Triangle, they're in Durham, they're in Raleigh, they're in Chapel Hill—all of these different counties. It really needs to be a statewide thing that across the board, this debt is getting waived because if you get all of your debt waived in Durham and you have a suspension in Wake County also and you still don't have the money to pay it, you don't have a valid license. If you're still continuing to drive, you can get another ticket and then you are back in the same situation that you started in.

Pro bono and mass relief efforts only address court suspensions, not license reinstatement with the DMV. As a result, they don't carry drivers to the finish line. As one attorney put it,

If you wipe all of the debt, but the person never gets their license officially reinstated, then they're still driving without a valid license. It's another step that there's nothing the district attorney can do about because that's directly with the DMV. There needs to be some way to do something like a mass reinstatement of these licenses that are no longer blocked by the courts.

The Epidemic of Driver’s License Suspensions in North Carolina

Only statewide reform can deliver broad and enduring relief. At the time of publication, the state legislature is considering one such measure, the bipartisan *Remove Barriers to Employment from Court Debt* act (HB 980).²⁹ This bill would abolish license suspensions stemming from failure to pay or failure to appear going forward, end current suspensions, and appropriate funds to implement a text reminder system for court appearances. If enacted, it would lift the burden of license suspension for hundreds of thousands of North Carolinians, while preventing FTA and FTP suspensions in the future.

License suspensions for failure to appear and failure to pay don’t make our roads safer. They do little to promote compliance with the courts. They don’t meaningfully improve the collection of fines and fees—comparative studies find higher repayment rates in places without debt-based suspension.³⁰ As policy, they are neither effective nor just. Instead, as the second report in this series details, suspensions inflict wide-ranging and multifaceted harms on low-income North Carolinians, while also causing broader economic and institutional damage.

²⁹ *An Act to Remove Barriers to Employment Due to Court Debt and to Appropriate Funds to Implement a Text Reminder System for Court Dates* (2025).

³⁰ Blair et al., *Reducing the Harms of Court Debt: Driver’s License Revocations Are an Ineffective Policy for Increasing Court Collections; Culp, Driven By Debt The Failure of the Omnibase Program; Fines and Fees Justice Center, Stepping on the Gas: Accelerating Florida’s Economic Growth by Restoring the Freedom to Drive.*

References

- An Act to Remove Barriers to Employment Due to Court Debt and to Appropriate Funds to Implement a Text Reminder System for Court Dates, HB 980 (2025).
<https://www.ncleg.gov/Sessions/2025/Bills/House/PDF/H980v1.pdf>.
- Blair, Hunter, Erin Hafkenschiel, and Kalen Russell. *Reducing the Harms of Court Debt: Driver's License Revocations Are an Ineffective Policy for Increasing Court Collections*. ThinkTennessee, 2022. <https://www.thinktennessee.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/drivers-license-revocation-report.pdf>.
- Crime and Justice Institute. *What Really Prevents Court Appearance? Survey Findings From People Who Failed to Appear in Two Counties*. Crime and Justice Institute, 2025. <https://www.cj institute.org/assets/sites/2/2025/02/What-Really-Prevents-Court-Appearance.pdf>.
- Crozier, William E., and Brandon L. Garrett. "Driven to Failure: An Empirical Analysis of Driver's License Suspension in North Carolina." *Duke Law Journal* 69 (2020): 1585-641.
- Crozier, William E., Brandon L. Garrett, and Karima Modjadidi. *Understanding the Impact of Driver's License Suspension: Lay Opinion in Impacted and Non-Impacted Populations*. Nos. 2020-70. Duke Law School Public Law & Legal Theory Series. 2020. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3645308.
- Crozier, William, Brandon Garrett, and Thomas Maher. *The Explosion of Unpaid Criminal Fines and Fees in North Carolina*. Duke University School of Law, Center for Science and Justice, 2020. <https://sites.law.duke.edu/justsciencelab/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2020/04/CSJ-Criminal-Fines-and-Fees-in-NC-v.7.pdf>.
- Culp, Emily. *Driven By Debt The Failure of the Omnibase Program*. Texas Appleseed and Texas Fair Defense Project, 2021. <https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/omnibaserevenuereport-aug11-final.pdf>.
- Desmond, Matthew, Carl Gershenson, and Barbara Kiviat. "Forced Relocation and Residential Instability among Urban Renters." *Social Service Review* 89, no. 2 (2015): 227-62. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681091>.
- Dindial, Emily, Emily Greytak, and Kana Tateishi. *Reckless Lawmaking: How Debt-Based Driver's License Suspension Laws Impose Harm and Waste Resources*. ACLU, 2021. https://www.aclu.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/reckless_lawmaking_aclu_final_4.19.21.pdf.

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

Fines and Fees Justice Center. *Stepping on the Gas: Accelerating Florida's Economic Growth by Restoring the Freedom to Drive*. Fines and Fees Justice Center, 2023. <https://finesandfeesjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Stepping-on-the-Gas-Feb-20231.pdf>.

Garrett, Brandon L., Karima Modjadidi, and William Crozier. "Undeliverable: Suspended Driver's Licenses and the Problem of Notice." *UCLA Criminal Justice Law Review* 4 (2020): 185-98.

Grunberg, Rita and Brandon Garrett. "North Carolina Driver's License Suspension Dashboard." North Carolina Driver's License Suspension Dashboard, January 2025. <https://wcsj-dukelow.shinyapps.io/ftaftc-dashboard2/>.

Kang, Seungbeom. "Severe and Persistent Housing Instability: Examining Low-Income Households' Residential Mobility Trajectories in the United States." *Housing Studies* 38, no. 9 (2021): 1615-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2021.1982871>.

McCoy, Evelyn F., Azhar Gulaid, Nkechi Erondy, and Janeen Buck Willison. *Removing Barriers to Pretrial Appearance: Lessons Learned from Tulsa County, Oklahoma, and Hennepin County, Minnesota*. Urban Institute, 2021. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/104177/removing-barriers-to-pretrial-appearance_0_0.pdf.

North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts. *Statistical and Operational Report of North Carolina Trial Courts, 2023-2024*. n.d. <https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/documents/publications/2023-24-Statistical-Operational-Report-Trial-Courts.pdf>.

North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles. "241115-2 REQ0568295 Num of Suspensions for FTA FTP and Both Reasons Corrected Watermarked." Version V1. June 6, 2025.

North Carolina Pro Bono Resource Center. "Driver's License Restoration Project." 2026. <https://ncprobono.org/drive/>.

Statewide Court Appearance Project Committee. *Statewide Court Appearance Project Final Report: Recommendations to Address Court Appearance Issues in North Carolina*. May 2025. <https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/documents/publications/Statewide-Court-Appearance-Project-Final-Report.pdf?VersionId=HnLla4ejZlJaVq5Adic.THprlo8H2bcM>.

Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law. *Driving Injustice: Consequences and Disparities in North Carolina Criminal Legal and Traffic Debt*. Duke University School of Law, 2021. <https://wcsj.law.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Driving-Injustice-Report-1.pdf>.

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law and Fines and Fees Justice Center. *Debt Sentence: How Fines and Fees Hurt Working Families*. 2023.

https://wcsj.law.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Debt_Sentence_FFJC-Wilson-Center-May-2023.pdf.

Appendix A

Adult Population, Number of FTA and FTP Suspensions and Suspension Rate by County

County	Population 18 Years and Over	Total Number of Suspensions	Suspensions as a Percent of the Population
Alamance County	135,505	25,129	18.5%
Alexander County	29,301	5,442	18.6%
Alleghany County	9,237	1,851	20.0%
Anson County	17,466	10,138	58.0%
Ashe County	22,279	4,057	18.2%
Avery County	15,073	2,321	15.4%
Beaufort County	35,948	9,561	26.6%
Bertie County	14,619	4,995	34.2%
Bladen County	23,485	6,579	70.6%
Brunswick County	124,942	17,182	13.8%
Buncombe County	222,651	10,477	4.7%
Burke County	71,558	32,230	45.0%
Cabarrus County	172,577	33,715	19.5%
Caldwell County	64,579	29,976	46.4%
Camden County	8,135	2,577	31.7%
Carteret County	56,945	13,570	23.8%
Caswell County	18,533	4,723	25.5%
Catawba County	126,620	58,933	46.5%
Chatham County	62,905	12,237	19.5%
Cherokee County	24,498	4,469	18.2%
Chowan County	11,119	1,543	13.9%
Clay County	9,543	1,095	11.5%
Cleveland County	77,804	14,639	18.8%
Columbus County	40,011	22,645	56.6%
Craven County	79,176	19,001	24.0%
Cumberland County	252,133	196,777	78.0%
Currituck County	23,058	4,675	20.3%
Dare County	30,732	5,678	18.5%
Davidson County	133,783	44,417	33.2%
Davie County	34,376	8,928	26.0%
Duplin County	37,419	22,070	59.0%
Durham County	263,055	26,534	10.1%
Edgecombe County	37,593	15,752	41.9%
Forsyth County	298,526	128,289	43.0%

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

Franklin County	56,218	13,665	24.3%
Gaston County	179,258	45,307	25.3%
Gates County	8,402	1,551	18.5%
Graham County	6,562	1,431	21.8%
Granville County	48,792	15,859	32.5%
Greene County	16,557	3,850	23.3%
Guilford County	422,662	96,245	22.8%
Halifax County	37,968	15,888	41.8%
Harnett County	101,512	45,739	45.1%
Haywood County	51,297	13,288	25.9%
Henderson County	95,109	16,638	17.5%
Hertford County	16,614	5,697	34.3%
Hoke County	38,670	27,725	71.7%
Hyde County	3,780	463	12.2%
Iredell County	148,652	35,097	23.6%
Jackson County	35,903	10,748	29.9%
Johnston County	169,671	72,393	42.7%
Jones County	7,545	4,289	56.8%
Lee County	49,143	11,911	24.2%
Lenoir County	42,457	12,764	30.1%
Lincoln County	71,590	13,337	18.6%
Macon County	30,756	6,663	21.7%
Madison County	17,846	3,807	21.3%
Martin County	17,351	6,679	38.5%
McDowell County	35,861	18,450	51.4%
Mecklenburg County	870,043	85,420	9.8%
Mitchell County	12,295	2,334	19.0%
Montgomery County	20,481	9,846	48.1%
Moore County	80,465	26,828	33.3%
Nash County	74,362	20,335	27.3%
New Hanover County	189,042	21,096	11.2%
Northampton County	14,127	3,333	23.6%
Onslow County	157,766	36,279	23.0%
Orange County	118,781	16,508	13.9%
Pamlico County	10,563	1,589	15.0%
Pasquotank County	32,008	5,815	18.2%
Pender County	49,206	8,334	16.9%
Perquimans County	10,677	2,714	25.4%
Person County	31,142	10,494	33.7%
Pitt County	135,229	24,989	18.5%

The Epidemic of Driver's License Suspensions in North Carolina

Polk County	16,623	4,106	24.7%
Randolph County	112,758	38,967	34.6%
Richmond County	32,707	17,559	53.7%
Robeson County	87,020	121,384	139.5%
Rockingham County	72,853	15,575	21.4%
Rowan County	115,387	37,385	32.4%
Rutherford County	51,712	10,552	20.4%
Sampson County	44,755	26,262	58.7%
Scotland County	26,619	13,601	51.1%
Stanly County	49,754	16,690	33.5%
Stokes County	36,522	8,501	23.3%
Surry County	56,306	18,672	33.2%
Swain County	10,965	6,427	58.6%
Transylvania County	27,983	2,609	9.3%
Tyrrell County	2,816	1,889	67.1%
Union County	181,266	42,713	23.6%
Vance County	32,173	33,664	104.6%
Wake County	881,746	145,102	16.5%
Warren County	15,360	6,258	40.7%
Washington County	8,887	2,719	30.6%
Watauga County	47,838	4,499	9.4%
Wayne County	89,701	14,690	16.4%
Wilkes County	52,780	17,670	33.5%
Wilson County	60,542	17,975	29.7%
Yadkin County	29,665	9,193	31.0%
Yancey County	15,232	1,935	12.7%

About the Poverty Research Project

The Poverty Research Project is part of The Justice Institute at North Carolina Central University School of Law. We conduct rigorous yet accessible nonpartisan research on economic hardship in North Carolina in order to inform public understanding, strengthen policy discussions and advance solutions to reduce poverty in the state. Our work focuses on three central goals: increasing awareness of poverty-related issues, collaborating with partners to support and amplify their efforts, and providing students with meaningful research and learning opportunities.

Website: <https://www.nccu.edu/law/academics/poverty-research-project>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/nccu-poverty-research-project/about/>

Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/nccupovresproject.bsky.social>

