

Policy Change in Ohio: How Failure-to-Pay Driver's License Suspensions Disappeared...in Seven Short Years

Friday, October 24, 2025 10:10 AM (20 minutes)

This paper chronicles the seven-year journey that led to the end of Ohio's practice of suspending driver's licenses for failure to pay fines and fees. It began with a simple question from Legal Aid attorneys in Cleveland: Why do so many bankruptcy clients have suspended driver's licenses? To investigate, we submitted two data requests to the Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles (BMV). Our analysis confirmed a troubling pattern—most suspensions were not due to unsafe driving, but rather to unpaid debt.

We found that debt-based suspensions were disproportionately concentrated in marginalized communities: they were 40 times more likely in low-income neighborhoods and 130 times more likely in non-white neighborhoods. The total amount of fines and fees preventing Ohioans from regaining their licenses exceeded 900million.

Armed with these findings, we built a coalition of organizations committed to reform. Our advocacy culminated in the passage of Ohio House Bill 29, signed into law in early 2025. The legislation eliminated over 400,000 failure-to-pay suspensions and forgave more than \$8 million in associated fees.

This paper outlines the challenges, strategies, and lessons learned throughout this policy reform effort, offering insights for applied geographers seeking to engage in similar work.

Organized Session Details

Is there a SINGLE day you are unavailable to present?

October 25, 2025

Is there a time of day you are unavailable to present?

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