



FINES & FEES
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Driving on

A graphic of a road with a yellow dashed line in the center, receding into the distance. On the right side of the road, there is a large orange octagonal stop sign with a white border. The word 'EMPTY' is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters across the center of the stop sign.

EMPTY

FLORIDA'S COUNTERPRODUCTIVE
AND COSTLY DRIVER'S LICENSE
SUSPENSION PRACTICES

CASE STUDY



Driving on **EMPTY**

FLORIDA'S COUNTERPRODUCTIVE
AND COSTLY DRIVER'S LICENSE
SUSPENSION PRACTICES

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Case Study Analysis

LICENSE SUSPENSION IN FOUR COUNTIES

We obtained driver's license suspension information for 2016–2018 directly from four counties across the state via public records requests: Duval, Glades, Hillsborough, and Seminole Counties.¹

We explored three main categories of information: total suspensions issued by county per individual, driver's license reinstatement rates and time periods, and demographic characteristics of each county where available, focusing on race and income.

OUR KEY FINDINGS:

- **295,000 individual's licenses were suspended from 2016–2018 in the four counties.**
 - **Once a license is suspended, it stays suspended; 77.12% of suspensions issued in 2016 remained in effect at the end of 2018.**
 - **Suspensions are disproportionately harming people of color and low-income people.**
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CASE STUDY COUNTIES VARY WIDELY BY POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The counties in this analysis were selected based on two main criteria: counties with large populations, and counties with high suspension rates relative to the general population. We used these criteria because we were most interested in the realities of driver's license suspension practices in areas where suspensions are having a large impact, either in sheer number of people affected or in terms of a large proportion of the population being affected.

The underlying characteristics of the counties selected vary widely in terms of population, demographic make-up, and economic prosperity. As the table below demonstrates, the case

study counties differ drastically in terms of total population, with the smallest county having about 6,000 drivers and the largest county over 2000 times that amount, with 1.5 million drivers. Two of the counties —Duval, and Seminole, have a higher proportion of either black or latinx people than in the general state population. Duval, Glades, and Seminole counties all have a higher proportion of people living below the poverty rate. These variations will be discussed throughout the findings section, particularly the ways in which these underlying characteristics may be influencing suspension rates and outcomes.

HIGH TOTAL NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL SUSPENSIONS

Data from the case study counties demonstrate that a large number of individuals are being impacted by driver's license suspensions for nonpayment. From 2016–2018, 298,000 people were issued driver's license suspensions in the four counties from which we have data.² If this proportion of individuals being suspended was the same across the entire state, that would mean that over 2.2 million individuals had been suspended for failure to pay in the past three years.³

The proportion of the driving population in each county affected by suspensions varies widely. In Glades County, for example, the county with the highest proportion of residents below the poverty line, there were 3,257 suspension cases from 2016–2018, which represents over half of the driving population of the county. In Seminole County, by contrast, while there were a large number of suspension cases, most of these were issued to the same small proportion of individuals— 5% of the driving population was affected over a three- year period.

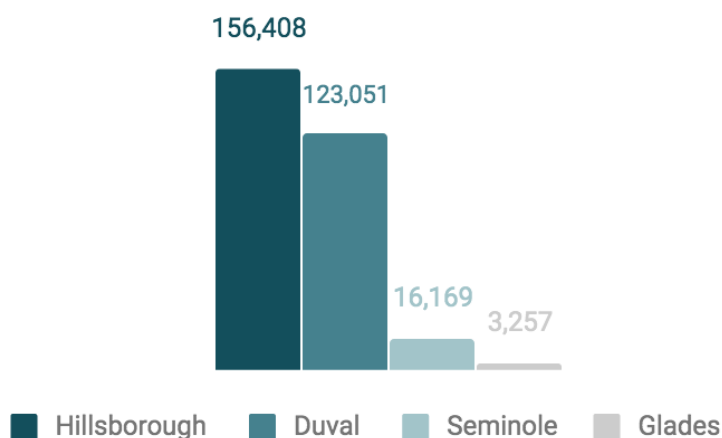
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Figure 10: **Characteristics of Case Study Counties.**

Characteristics of Case Study Counties					
	Duval	Glades	Hillsborough	Seminole	State
County Population	937,934	13,754	1,408,566	462,659	—
Driving Population	689,954	6,346	1,001,907	354,353	16,008,166
Black population %	30.50%	13.80%	12.70%	17.80%	16.90%
Latinx Population %	9.70%	20.70%	21.40%	28.60%	25.60%
White Population % (Non-Latinx)	53.20%	60.8%	60.6%	49.10%	54.10%
% Below poverty rate	15.10%	18.90%	11.20%	15.50%	14%

Sources: Census American Community Survey, 2017; "Licensed Drivers By County, 2016," Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles

Figure 11: **Between 2016–2018, 298,000 Individuals Had Their Licenses Suspended**



REINSTATEMENT RATES HIGHLY VARIANT, BUT LOW ON AVERAGE

Just as important as whether a suspension is issued in the first place is when the person affected is able to regain their license, if ever. If suspensions do not typically result in reinstatements, or if there is a long gap between suspension and reinstatement, suspensions

are a questionable enforcement mechanism for payment because people are still not making the payments they owe. The time period of suspension is also important to assess the potential harms of Florida's current policy, as prolonged suspensions likely have greater negative consequences on individuals and their families.

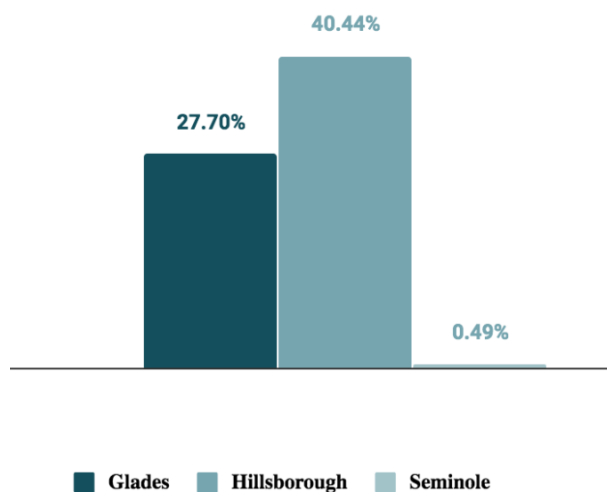
Three of the case study counties: Glades, Hillsborough, and Seminole, provided data on whether an individual's license was ever reinstated after being suspended. There is extreme variation by county in the proportion of licenses that are ever restored, ranging from less than 1% of licenses in Seminole County to 40.4% in Hillsborough County.⁴

On average, 77.12% of driver's license suspensions issued in 2016 remained in effect at the end of 2018.

This high variation is likely due to two main factors. First, underlying county characteristics that influence people's ability to pay overdue fines, such as the number of individuals in

poverty, may make certain areas more vulnerable to prolonged suspensions. Policies around driver's license suspensions in each individual county likely also play a large role.⁵ Counties that allow more payment plan options or build discretion into the process where possible likely make it more feasible for people to restore their driver's licenses. Even assuming that more counties resemble Hillsborough County, the county with the highest reinstatement rate, that would still mean that half of people with license suspensions for failure to pay are not getting their licenses restored within a three-year period.

Figure 12: **Percentage of 2016 Suspended Licenses Reinstated By End of 2018,**



On average, 77.12% of driver's license suspensions issued in 2016 remained in effect at the end of 2018.

PEOPLE OF COLOR AND LOW INCOME PEOPLE ARE MOST AFFECTED BY SUSPENSIONS

This analysis finds that people of color and low-income people are more likely to be affected by suspensions. We use several methods to examine this relationship. First, we analyze individual level information provided directly by the case study counties that maintain demographic data. Second, we use the zip codes associated with suspensions to see if areas with higher suspensions rates also have higher rates of people of color and people living in poverty. Finally, in one case study county, we use the addresses of people with license suspensions to even more precisely isolate the relationship

between suspension rates and race and income. By all measures, as outlined in detail below, we find there is a disproportionate impact of suspensions on low income people and people of color.

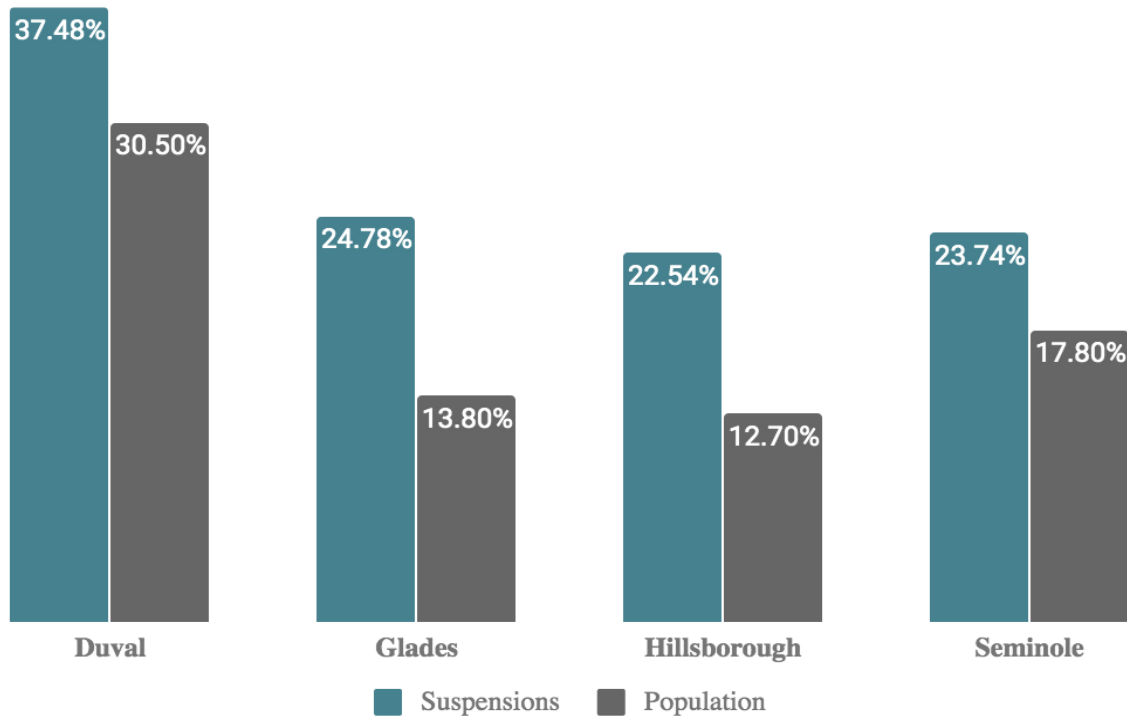
We focus on the two largest racial minorities in the state, the black and latinx population. both of which have been disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system. To examine the effects on low income communities, we primarily use the measure of whether an individual's income is below the federal poverty level.

In each of the four counties analyzed, the proportion of black people with suspensions was disproportionate to their representation in the county population.⁶ Across the four counties, black people are suspended at a rate 1.5 times their representation in the population.

“The data shows us that the best antidote to recidivism is a job that pays a living wage. Most good jobs require a valid driver's license. Operation New Hope supports smart law initiatives aimed to reduce unnecessary financial penalties for returning citizens.”

—KEVIN GAY, CEO & Founder, Operation New Hope

Figure 13: **Black Suspension Rate vs. Population Rate**



The data on the latinx population is more mixed. In Glades County, 27% of people suspended in the county are latinx, compared to 21% of latinx residents in the county. In Hillsborough County, only 9% of total people with suspensions were recorded as latinx, which is significantly less than their share in the population.

There are some serious limitations to the racial data provided by the four case study counties. The racial categories provided were determined by a law enforcement officer, not by a person self-identifying as part of a particular racial group. In addition, in some counties a significant portion of the sample was missing a racial designation—up to 50% in Hillsborough County. Given these limitations, it is especially important to also use geographic data and see suspension patterns emerge based on the racial populations in different areas.

A definitive pattern emerges when analyzing suspension rates by zip code: high suspension rates are concentrated in areas with low incomes and high rates of people of color.⁷ While there is not enough information to determine a causal

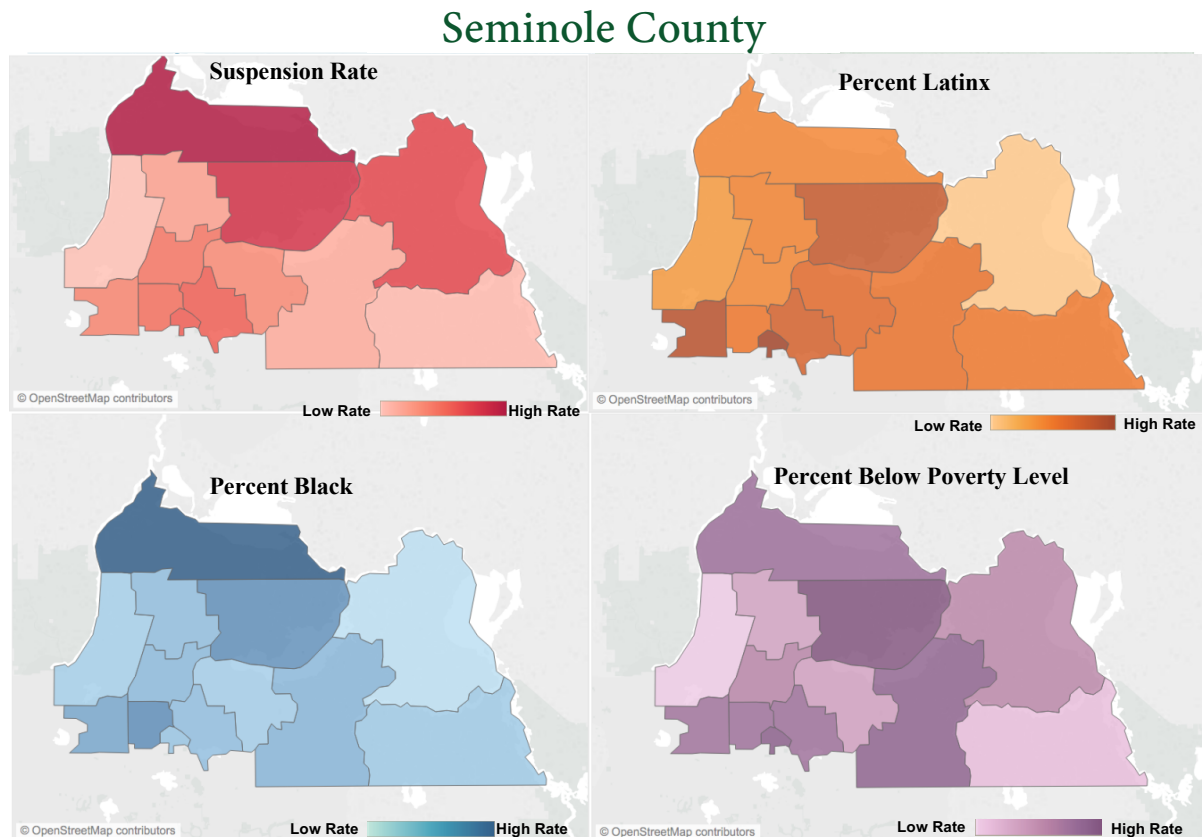
relationship, there is a positive association between the suspension rate per the adult population and these characteristics. The proportion of black residents, latinx residents, and residents below the poverty rate when combined account for 54% of the variation in suspension rates by zip code. The percentage of people below the poverty rate in each zip code has the strongest association with an increase in suspension rate out of all three factors

The relationship between race, income, and suspension rates can also be observed visually looking at a map of suspensions by zip code in each county. Figure 14 is a map of Seminole County comparing the concentration of suspension rates to the black population, the latinx population, and the population below the poverty level.

Another way to examine this association is to compare the characteristics of zip codes with high suspension rates and low suspension rates to see how they differ on key demographic characteristics. The differences in terms of race and income between zip codes with suspension rates higher than the median and below the

Figure 14: **Seminole County Characteristics By Zip Code**

Data obtained from public records requests and on file with author.



median are striking. The percentage of black residents in zip codes with higher suspension rates, for example, is 16% higher than zip codes with lower suspension rates. This pattern holds true for the percentage of latinx residents and the percentage of the adult population below the poverty rate, as can be seen below.

Hillsborough County data provided exact addresses for all traffic related suspensions, providing an increased level of precision to compare to the zip code analysis. Looking at suspensions per individual by census tract, the same pattern as seen in the zip code data emerges— high suspension rate areas are associated with tracts with higher rates of low-income people and people of color. Controlling for other factors that may influence suspension rates, such as gender, education level, and age gives us further confidence that failure to pay suspensions are having disproportionate effects on marginalized communities.

CONCLUSIONS: CASE STUDY COUNTIES

While the four counties examined here vary widely in their suspension rates and outcomes, it is clear that driver's license suspensions for nonpayment effect a significant number of individuals in each county. On average, 77.12% of driver's license suspensions from 2016–2018 remained in effect at the end of 2018. This shows that suspensions can be long lasting and that paying all outstanding fees may be impossible for some, despite the consequences. Finally, by multiple metrics, this analysis finds a disturbing link between suspension rates and race and income, indicating that poor people and people of color may bear the brunt of Florida's suspension practices across the state.

Endnotes

¹ While the county level data provided by the FLHSMV provides insights into overall statewide suspensions for failure to pay, it does not help to determine 1) how long driver's license suspensions tend to remain in effect, and 2) whether people of color and low-income people are more likely to be affected by suspensions. The FLHSMV data also does not reveal the number of individuals affected by these suspension policies, only the total number of suspensions. Since multiple suspensions can be issued per individual, it is difficult to obtain an estimate of the number of people impacted. Unfortunately, despite multiple communications with the FLHSMV, more detailed statewide information could not be obtained for this analysis.

² Calculations based on data provided by FLHSMV.

³ These four counties represent 13.2% of the total state population. If 298,000 was 13.2 percent of the states total suspensions, statewide suspensions would equal 2.25 million.

⁴ Calculations based on data provided by FLHSMV.

⁵ As stated in the statutory review section, counties vary widely in terms of the time they allow people to be delinquent on payments, whether the county uses discretion to initiate a suspension or not, and whether licenses can be reinstated after partial payment of overdue fees if a judge assesses it makes sense to do so.

⁶ Four counties provided some racial data linked to suspension information that could be used to create estimates of the number of suspensions per individual per racial group.

⁷ Four counties provided information on the zip codes associated with suspension cases: Duval, Glades, Hillsborough, and Seminole. I matched these codes with demographic census data to examine the relationship between suspension rates and people of color and low income people.



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