

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/how-to-use-budgets-to-understand-criminal-justice-fines-and-fees>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

Local and state governments charge people caught in the criminal legal system a range of fines and fees. These costs can easily add up to thousands of dollars for people stuck in the system, creating a major financial burden for households that are often already cash-strapped. It's hard to find out who is paying fines and fees and who is collecting them, but they are usually reported in budget documents. In many states, advocates are working to change these policies by pushing to end court costs for people with low incomes and by advocating to abolish fees. This toolkit will help you analyze your local budgets to better understand how fines and fees impact your community and what areas most need reform.

Fines and fees can often be hidden in plain sight, but because they ultimately become revenue for governments, they are usually reported in budget documents sometimes in great detail.

To identify criminal justice fines and fees in your community's budget, search for terms like fines, fees, forfeitures, surcharge, cost, forfeit, inmate, commissary, probation, monitoring, restitution, telephone, penalty, and traffic.

You'll want to determine how much your community collects in fines and fees, how many people pay them, what kinds are collected, and which agencies rely most on them.

Equipped with this information about how fines and fees impact your community, you can share what you learn, connect with policymakers and push for greater budget transparency.

PUBLICATION

NEWS

Transformative change, sent to your inbox.

Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.