

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/stimulus-checks-arent-enough-we-need-to-end-court-fees>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Many people saw a boost to their finances in recent weeks, a result of the federal governments third round of stimulus payments of up to \$1,400 per person. While this money is meant to provide aid to millions struggling due to the COVID-19 recession, its impact is undermined by states and localities that are continuing to charge people fines and fees stemming from criminal legal system involvement.

Each year, millions of people who are caught in the U.S. criminal legal system a disproportionate number of them Black, Indigenous, or people of color pay billions of dollars in fines and fees related to their criminal cases. At a moment when the country is taking dramatic steps to reduce hardship, many are at risk of being left out of the recovery because they owe hundreds sometimes thousands of dollars to courts, jails, prisons, and probation departments.

These counterproductive fines and fees impose a financial burden on the people who owe them and can create a community-wide drain on resources when families and broader social networks are needed to help pay. They've also lessened the impact of anti-poverty efforts in previous years. In 2015, for example, [New Orleanians](#) many of them Black, brown, and poor residents of the city paid \$4.5 million in fines and fees. This was \$1 million more than city residents received in cash assistance from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program.

Owing fines and fees can prevent a person from achieving any kind of financial stability. [One study in Alabama](#) found that more than 80 percent of the people who owed court debt gave up basic needs like food, rent, medical bills, car payments, and child support in order to pay it. Interviews with people who owe fines and fees show how criminal legal debt burdens all aspects of their lives. In New Orleans, a man named Keith [reported](#) the amount of stress his thousands of dollars of court debt created in his life:

A person paying probation fees in Texas also [expressed](#) that the amount they owed in fees crowded out other basic needs in their budget:

What would happen if instead of collecting money in fines and fees, we left that money in peoples pockets? Research on cash assistance programs can provide us with some clues. [Studies](#) on the Earned Income Tax Credit and the Child Tax Credit have shown that cash infusions for low-income families improve childrens health and educational attainment. [One study from Stockton, California](#), found that families who were given cash payments spent the money on basic needs, with food representing the largest category of spending. These families were better prepared to handle a financial emergency and were more likely to have a full-time job than those who did not receive the money.

We have a good idea what would happen if, instead of charging people caught in the criminal legal system hundreds of dollars for court fees, we allowed them to keep that money. They would use it to buy food, pay rent, seek needed medical care, or afford childcare. They would have more financial stability, allowing them to make longer-term plans instead of scrambling month-to-month. And we might expect them to experience less of the toxic stress that so often accompanies poverty in the United States, leading to happier and healthier families and thriving communities.

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