

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/two-ways-to-show-up-for-black-lives-in-the-wake-of-george-floyds-murder>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In the wake of mass protests and demonstrations against racism and police violence over the past ten days, many people are asking, What can I do to show up? Dozens of Internet threads suggest donating to community bail funds to pay protest bail.

Bail funds are nonprofit or volunteer-led groups that operate on a simple model: they raise money to pay bail for people who are jailed after an arrest, waiting for their cases to be resolved. So long as the person bailed out makes their court dates, that money returns to the fund and is used to pay bail for someone else.

Informal bail funds have existed for centuries, from times of slavery to mass incarceration, as a tool to secure a family members or friends freedom. Bail funds have also existed for decades to support protest. In recent years, a [network](#) of bail funds more than 60 to date has sprung up across the country as a community-led response to one of the most pernicious and unjust practices in the criminal legal system: money bail. The use of money bail including commercial bail bonds that allow private bail bond agencies to turn a profit off the bail system effectively criminalizes poverty. In many places, even when bail is set at relatively low amounts \$500 or less, [40 percent](#) of people remain incarcerated simply because they are unable to pay.

It is largely because of America's money bail system that almost [500,000 people](#) on any given day are locked up in jail. Once again, Black people are hit the hardest. [Systemic inequality](#) begets the Black-white wealth gap, where Black families are far less likely to have money for bail. That inequity is compounded by the potential for racism and disparate treatment by prosecutors and judges in the bail decision itself. [Studies that compare the cases of Black and white people](#) facing similar charges and with similar histories of criminal justice involvement find that bail is routinely set significantly higher for Black people than their white counterparts.

As police respond to the current protests with more violence and arrests, bail funds have seen an [outpouring of support](#) collectively raising upwards of \$30 million from [tens of thousands](#) of donors across the country in a matter of days. Some bail funds, like the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund and the Minneapolis Freedom Fund, have received so many donations in the past week that they are [redirecting supporters](#) to give to Black-led organizing and advocacy instead.

I've been on the board of the Brooklyn Community Bail Fund for the past three years and have seen firsthand the power of paying bail to get people out of jail, home to their families, and back to their jobs. Importantly, bail funds prove that people don't need a financial stake in their case to come to court and stay safe in the community. And, in this moment, paying protest bail serves as a check to mass arrests intended to quell peaceful demonstrations across the country.

However, bail funds alone are not the solution to a racist, harmful bail system, but rather [part of a larger movement](#). There is simply not enough money to free the hundreds of thousands of people who wouldn't be jailed but for systemic racism and poverty. Besides, at some point, paying bail without a larger strategy to overhaul the money bail system entirely is simply greasing the wheels of the status quo.

That is why, in this moment, showing up for Black lives means donating to bail funds *and* investing in the organizing, advocacy, and data needed to overhaul the money bail system once and for all. This must be done by putting pressure on mayors and council members to incentivize funding and change in bail policy and practice. At the ballot box, we must vote for prosecutors and judges who are committed to wholesale reform of the bail system. And in statehouses across the country, we must fight for bail legislation that eliminates money bail, reduces the number of people behind bars, and ends racial disparities. Now, as ever, Black lives depend on it.

NEWS

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