

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/who-should-pay-the-price-for-jail-programming>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

It may come as a surprise to learn that [90 percent of jails](#) collect revenue from the people incarcerated there. To learn more about this practice, we at Vera reviewed data submitted by 35 jurisdictions as part of our [Price of Jails](#) survey. We found that while common, it is not especially lucrative: collected funds support only about 3 percent of jails total budgets. We also found that on the other side of this equation, the payments incarcerated people make to jails to produce this revenue are substantial amounting to an average of \$1,259 per incarcerated person per year. This raises a question: is such a heavy burden to individuals worthwhile for such a small benefit to jails?

The fees and charges in question don't relate to bail bonds or supervision fees, which are typically handled by the courts. Jails most commonly collect fees or surcharges on phone and video calls, food or other items from the jail store, medical visits, and participation in work release programs. But the services for which jails collect payment don't end there. They include charges for booking, electronic monitoring, drug testing, laundry, home detention, finger printing, and more.

In response to Vera's survey, jail administrators reported that such fees play a critical role in paying for programming and resources for incarcerated people. The collected money is often but not always deposited in a special inmate-welfare fund. This is used to pay for treatment, training, education programs, holiday meals, library books, reading glasses, and other products and programs some of which are designed to promote crime-free living post-release that counties and municipalities are unwilling to support. Indeed, some surveyed jails report that up to 90 percent of their inmate programming is paid for by surcharges on calls made from jail.

This practice can be viewed in two ways. On one hand, this money supports a diverse array of programs in jails that may not otherwise provide any programming at all. On the other, some incarcerated people may not have the means to pay fines and fees without financial assistance from their families. This can place an undue burden on families that are likely already struggling to make ends meet without the aid of the incarcerated wage earner. For other incarcerated people, this inability to pay up front could mean incurring debt, potentially setting the stage for a new cycle of jail incarceration should they be unable to pay when they return home.

Because the financial impact of funding these programs is much greater for incarcerated people and their families than it is for local governments, jails (or counties) should invest in these programs in order to reduce recidivism, avert the costs of future crime, and relieve incarcerated individuals most of whom are legally presumed innocent of a financial burden they likely [cannot afford](#).

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