

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/eliminating-money-injustice-in-new-orleans/new-orleans-road-map-to-eliminate-money-injustice>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Yesterday, Vera New Orleans released [*Paid in Full*](#), a report that draws a roadmap for how New Orleans could become the first city in the nation to completely eliminate the use of money bail and conviction fees. If implemented, this effort to eliminate money injustice could have a monumental impact on the financial wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities in New Orleans and cement the city as a leader for reform nationwide.

The recommendations for action laid out in *Paid in Full* build on years of research and partnerships between Vera New Orleans, local leaders, and community organizations. These groups will convene together [on July 3 for a public event](#) co-sponsored by Vera, RFK Human Rights, and Global Citizen to highlight the urgency for change and uplift the voices of those most impacted by money injustice in the city.

In a series of interviews leading up to the event, we will be speaking with key people in this growing local and national movement. See below excerpts from our first conversation, with [Paid in Full co-author Alison Shih](#).

1. *Paid in Full* is a follow-up to Vera's 2017 report *Past Due*, which first highlighted the problem of bail, fines and fees in New Orleans. Can you talk a little bit about what has changed in New Orleans since *Past Due* was released, and why *Paid in Full* is a necessary accompaniment?

Yes, a couple of things changed. The first is that, since 2017, there have been two federal court cases that dealt separately with fines and fees and then bail. These rulings said that 1) judges cannot order people to pay money bail or fines and fees without determining their ability to pay; and 2) that judges in New Orleans are not the proper arbiters of whether someone has the ability to pay, because they have a conflict of interest.

Our courts receive a percentage of every conviction fee and every bond fee that's paid. So because a federal court has ruled that it's unconstitutional for the New Orleans justice system to function as it's been functioning, we have an opportunity at this moment to create an alternative system. Additionally, the city government has taken the initiative to fully fund the court so that they no longer need to rely on revenues from bail bonds or fines and fees to fund its operations. We wanted to seize this moment and present not just an update about the landscape from *Past Due*, but also provide a blueprint for ending money injustice in New Orleans altogether.

2. The recommendations outlined in *Paid in Full* were developed in close collaboration with city officials and community organizations. Why were these partnerships important?

In order to arrive at a plan that is thorough, it's necessary to consult people who are impacted as well as people who are involved in keeping the system running. But ultimately, it's necessary to have support and input from community groups. We have 32 community groups that have endorsed this plan, and these organizations cover a broad spectrum: including community organizations, faith-based groups, and leaders in the business community. Many of these organizations have been coming together for over a year under the banner of the Alliance for Equity and Justice, which informed our work and will be key in ensuring it is made real.

3. What if any lessons has New Orleans gleaned from other jurisdictions looking to curb or eliminate money injustice?

We looked at the policies and implementation efforts of several jurisdictions: New Jersey; New Mexico; Harris County, Texas; and Kentucky to name a few. New Jersey's efforts were particularly helpful because in the first two years of completely moving away from money bail, they have decreased their pretrial population by 30 percent. Simultaneously, both their violent and non-violent crime rates have declined. So we crafted a solution informed by New Jersey's and other jurisdictions' reforms and tailored our plan to local needs and Louisiana state laws.

4. What other impact do you hope these recommendations will have in New Orleans and other jurisdictions looking to implement reform?

Money bail is a destabilizing thing. When people are asked to pay for their freedom, they have less money for basic necessities or to put back into their communities. We know that New Orleans families are scraping together \$9 million every year to pay bail bondsmen, the court, and other government agencies so they can buy their own freedom or the freedom of their loved ones. So eliminating money bail and conviction fees saves communities in our city \$9 million on the front end, which is good for the financial health of families and of communities.

The other impact is really a philosophical shift. Money is an arbitrary measure, so instead of talking about how much is this particular crime worth? or how much money should somebody have to buy their way out?, we're framing it as is pretrial detention really necessary? And if it's not, then people should be free pretrial respecting the presumption of innocence and due process, and ultimately improving the financial health of individual families and our communities.

5. Has participation in national initiatives like the [John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations Safety and Justice Challenge](#) had any role in positioning New Orleans for larger-scale reform?

If you look at all the progress that's been made in the last several years, where we've already cut the jail population to approximately a quarter of what it once was and now this reform has the potential to cut it by more than half, again that would bring New Orleans from having been one of the most incarcerated cities in America to well below the national average for incarceration.

The Safety and Justice Challenge is an initiative to change the way America thinks about and uses jails. It supports a network of 52 jurisdictions including New Orleans working to reduce their local jail populations. New Orleans's participation in that initiative since 2015 really primed the pump here, because New Orleans has already been working on reducing the jail population for years and has had a lot of success, and people here have noticed that reducing the jail population has not resulted in calamity. So there's an appetite for further decarceration, and that makes this unique reform possible.

6. Can you talk about the July 3 event and give us a preview of what to expect?

This event is really exciting. It's equal parts entertainment and information and it serves a few purposes because we'll have so many of our community partners there, and it will really demonstrate that this plan is turning into a movement. We've got great partners nationally in RFK Human Rights and Global Citizen. We'll have three musical acts, very prominent local talent, in Hot 8 Brass Band, Soul Creole, and Brass-A-Holics. We'll have panel discussions with people directly impacted by money injustice, with people who have been involved in creating the plan and understand how to fix the problem, and we're inviting local leaders to come and talk about ways that we can, as a community, go about fixing the problem of money injustice. We have a photo essay that's being prepared by photographer William Widner, that will depict people who are impacted and include quotes about their experiences. And we've got a great emcee in Brittany Packnett, who is a national leader in criminal justice reform.

7. We can't wait! Any closing words?

This work is pretty amazing, because not only does it have the potential to completely change the community that I live in right now, but as the rest of the nation is really gearing up and moving in this direction, it has the potential to influence other cities and states. Historically the issue of money injustice has been recognized for at least half a century, and we now are at a point in history where people have an appetite for change, and with our leadership, and with the federal court decisions, it can actually be made a reality. It's pretty exciting to be in any way a part of that moment.

[An interview with *Paid in Full* co-author Jon Wool also appeared on Arnold Ventures.](#)

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