

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/covid-19-1/in-a-precarious-economy-governments-and-courts-must-take-immediate-action-to-reduce-criminal-justice-fines-and-fees>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Poor conditions, inadequate access to health care, and overcrowding put incarcerated people at a uniquely high risk of infection by COVID-19. But there is also a separate, less obvious threat caused by the pandemic, faced not only by those behind bars but also by millions of others involved in the justice system: extreme economic instability as a result of criminal justice fines and fees.

Fines and fees exist at every stage of the criminal justice process, from arrest and booking to conviction and sentencing. People can be ticketed for even minor infractions, charged to enter a jail, and then charged additional fees for each day they remain there. Even those serving non-jail sentences like probation or community service can be charged fees to participate. In addition, fines a monetary sanction imposed when someone is convicted of a misdemeanor or a felony are commonly imposed. These monetary sanctions add up and [can total thousands of dollars](#). What's more, the people being forced to pay are typically poor and are [disproportionately people of color](#). Fines and fees ensnare millions of justice-involved people in cycles of debt, future criminal justice consequences, and ever-more precarious financial situations. And this economic and racial injustice is an issue we must address urgently.

For decades, jurisdictions around the country have [increased their reliance on fines and fees](#) in order to fill budget gaps. Today, as the escalating public health crisis threatens another global recession, we must prevent a similar reinvestment in this harmful and regressive system of taxation. Many Americans have already lost their jobs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, making them unable to afford rent, groceries, and critical medical care. In the midst of this crisis, governments and courts should not only resist the urge to increase and expand criminal justice fines and fees to make up for budget shortfalls, but also take bold, proactive measures to ensure that fines and fees are not a barrier to people's basic needs.

Below are evidence-based policies recommended by Vera's partners at the [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#) to support justice-involved people in the wake of the present public health and economic crises.

In Florida and New York, two of the five states in which Vera's new [Justice Fines and Fees project](#) is conducting research, governments and courts have already taken some steps to change how they use and collect fines and fees in light of the pandemic. One practice that courts commonly use to coerce payment for fines and fees is to suspend drivers licenses. In Florida, four [state circuit courts](#) have issued administrative orders to reduce these suspensions. Some places in New York State have also temporarily stopped processing new suspensions for failure to pay. In [Buffalo](#), late fees and interest on parking, traffic, and other city accounts (such as utilities) have been suspended. And in Brooklyn, all non-essential court dates including dates for payment of fines and fees [have been adjourned](#), and no warrants or civil judgments will be issued for unpaid court debt. Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez also [announced](#) that during this time he will not prosecute low-level crimes.

In light of COVID-19, governments and courts must prioritize public health and protect our most vulnerable community members. Justice-involved people living paycheck-to-paycheck cannot continue to bear this unfair burden. Balancing budgets on the backs of the poor is an injustice every day, now more inequitable than ever.

See more about the work that Vera is doing in partnership with the [Fines and Fees Justice Center](#), the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#), and the [State Priorities Partnership](#) to develop solutions for eliminating government reliance on fines and fees and identifying fair and sustainable alternatives for funding the system [here](#).

View the full list of policy recommendations and nationwide rapid response policies being tracked by the Fines and Fees Justice Center [here](#).

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