

# Vera Institute of Justice

## Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/eliminating-money-injustice-in-new-orleans/moving-to-action-on-ending-money-injustice>

### Public Facing Advocacy Writing

In this series on money injustice in New Orleans, we're speaking with experts and advocates on the need to fundamentally rethink the use of money bail and conviction fees which bear a disproportionate burden on poor communities and communities of color. Vera's recent report [Paid in Full](#) highlights the landscape of money injustice in New Orleans and provides a roadmap for how the city could become the first in the nation to eliminate both money bail and conviction fees. The report and roadmap are endorsed by 32 local organizations, who have partnered with Vera in calling for change. These organizations, local leaders, and staff from Vera New Orleans [will convene tonight for a public event](#) co-sponsored by Vera, RFL 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.

Previously, we [interviewed Paid in Full co-author Alison Shih](#) and local community advocates [Roy Brumfield](#) and [Gilda Lewis](#). Today, in the final interview of the series, we speak with policing and criminal justice reform activist, co-host of [Pod Save the People](#), and event emcee Brittany Packnett.

#### **1. Can you talk about how the issues of money bail, fines and fees fit into your broader justice reform advocacy work?**

The issues of money bail and harmful fines and fees are inextricably linked to issues of freedom and justice with regards to policing and the criminal justice system. You can change all of the policies in a police department, but if people are literally punished for being poor, we won't actually see freedom come about in our time.

#### **2. National criminal justice reform discussions have focused heavily on the state and federal level. Why should people be paying attention to reforms at the local level as well?**

Because the kinds of habits, the kinds of practices that we see in New Orleans are the same as the ones that we saw across St. Louis County in places like Ferguson where Michael Brown was shot and killed by a police officer in 2014. We see municipal governments and police departments raising their revenue on the backs of everyday people; we see poverty being criminalized. It's happening every single day for things as small as traffic tickets, jaywalking tickets, no-show court fees, fines, etc. We have to focus on this at every level. Because when people are suffering, their suffering doesn't care whether it came from the federal government, state government, or local government. We need to ensure that people's suffering is relieved and that equitable practices are instituted.

#### **3. Two federal judges recently ruled that the New Orleans criminal justice system in which judges impose bail, fines and fees that their courts directly depend on for funding is an unconstitutional conflict of interest. What is your reaction to those rulings and how do you think they could impact the reform movement nationwide?**

This is a step in the right direction. And I hope that rulings like this will set precedent for places like Ferguson and Baltimore where some of these lawsuits are ongoing. The fact of the matter is, through fines and fees, people are being double and triple and quadruple taxed for being citizens of a particular municipality. There are a myriad of ways for police departments to fund themselves, and beyond that we should be thinking much more creatively about how not to fund more police departments, but how to actually create community safety and health from the ground up. And most certainly we need to ensure that the courts are making decisions that have the best interests of the people in mind. So this is a step in the right direction, but there's a great deal more to be done to end money bail in New Orleans and across the country.

#### **4. Vera's recent report, *Paid in Full* which is in part a response to these rulings outlines how the city of New Orleans could become the first city in the nation to eliminate money bail and conviction fees. What would it mean for the city and nation if these reforms happened?**

I think it would give people a sense of hope once again. That you can set out to change something and that it will indeed come true. That people who have been continuing to suffer under this system will hopefully find immediate relief, and not continue to be punished by an unfair and unequal justice system. Most importantly, my hope is that it will set a model for people across the country, so that there can be a blueprint that we see spread from New Orleans to Baton Rouge to Ferguson to Baltimore to Sacramento to Tulsa, Oklahoma, so that everyday people all across the country don't continue to suffer from money bail.

#### **5. What kind of progress have you seen in recent years on the conversation and movement to eliminate money bail?**

We've certainly seen progress on the conversation, and we've begun to see a little bit of progress on the legal front. We've seen more people become aware of the fact that money bail criminalizes poverty and can be absolutely detrimental and deadly for people. People are now having a conversation about the fact that Kalief Browder might still be alive if he had been able to afford his bail. That Layleen Polanco Black and Latinx trans woman who was found dead in her cell in Rikers Island might still be alive if she had been able to afford her \$500 bail. We've been talking much more across the country about how many people are incarcerated pretrial because they cannot afford their bail. Places like the workhouse jail, in my hometown in St. Louis, where upwards of 90 percent of the folks who are incarcerated there have not been convicted of any crime but are simply there because they cannot afford to pay money bail. We're finally

having these conversations, and were finally paying attention to the myriad of local activists who have been taking on this fight for decades across the country. But now its time for us to move from conversations to action. Now its time for us to make sure that were reflecting local grassroots work to end money bail, that we are pressuring policymakers to end money bail, and that we are making it unpopular for this kind of system to continue.

**6. Youre emceeing a live music and panel discussion event in New Orleans on July 3co-hosted by Vera, Global Citizen, and RFK Human Rights. Tell me what inspired you to get involved and what youre looking forward to?**

Im inspired by the work that Vera does to shine a light on the continued injustices in our system, and to make sure that these stories are not forgotten and that we really look at the human costs of the criminal justice system as it currently stands. New Orleans is one of my favorite cities and I am a huge admirer of the local activists and artists that have come together to make sure that not only does this conversation continue, but that action is taken on behalf of New Orleanians. And I think that this is a powerful moment during a weekend when the eyes of the country are on New Orleans (because of the [Essence music festival](#)), when a great deal of time and attention and money is being spent in New Orleans, that we point people toward what they can do to help end money bail in a city that we all love so much. Its important not just to be cultural tourists but to be people who actually contribute to this space that were in. Especially given the fact that everything we love about New Orleans is from Black people, and the folks disproportionately suffering under this criminal justice system in New Orleans are Black people, it is our duty and our responsibility to devote our time and attention to this issue in New Orleans on this weekend.

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