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# What Parking Ticket Data Can (and Cannot) Tell Us amid Calls to Reform Fines and Fees

Livia Mucciolo, Fay Walker, Aravind Boddupalli

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Reporter Ray Routhier follows Portland Parking Control Officer Chad Jones as he writes out a ticket during his rounds in the Old Port. (Photo by John Patriquin/Portland Press Herald via Getty Images)

For many people, a parking ticket is just a nuisance. But parking enforcement is an important tool in administering city services, like snowplows and fire hydrants, and maintaining access to commercial corridors.

Like other fines and fees, however, their costs can [snowball into large court debts](#) that derail finances and job prospects, especially for people with low incomes and communities of color. In recent years, local policymakers and advocates have begun [acknowledging and working to address the negative consequences of fines and fees](#).

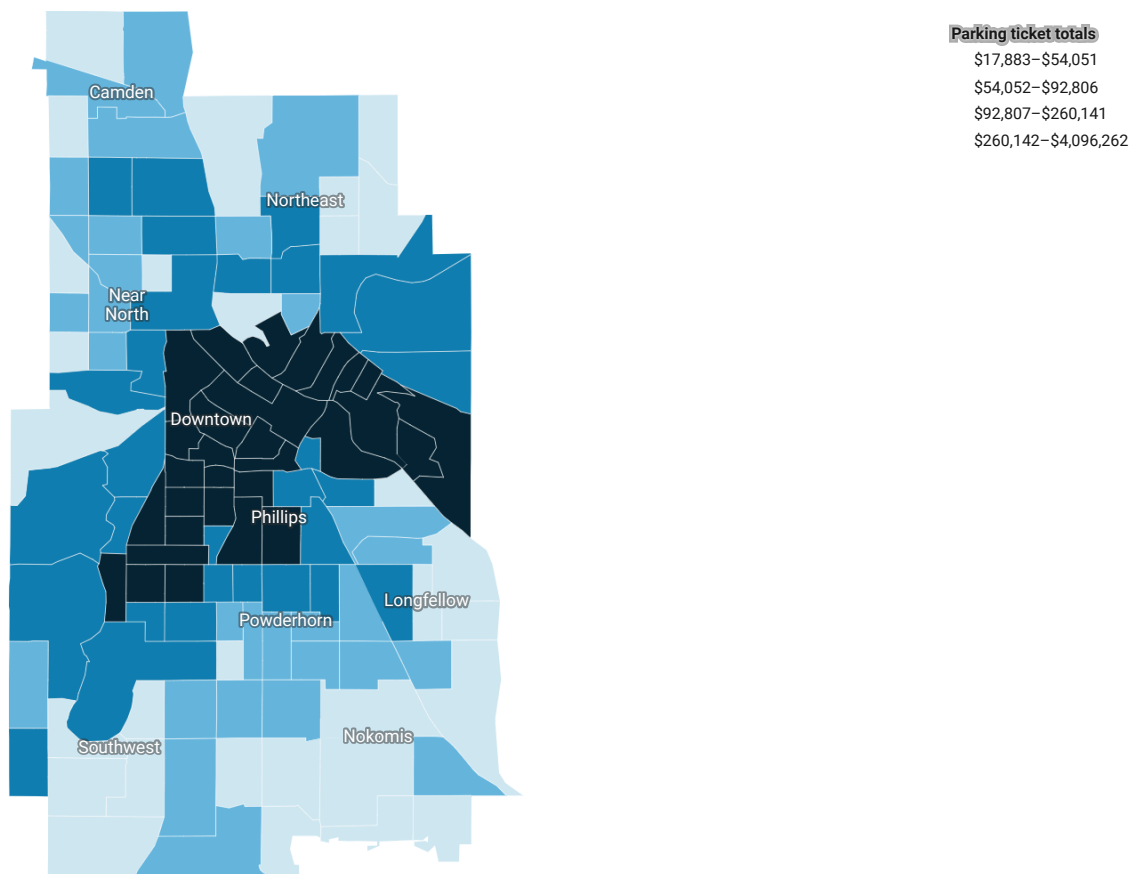
In a new brief, we analyzed [the scale and dispersion of parking tickets](#) in Austin, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Portland, Oregon. If we know how, where, and why parking tickets are issued, we might better understand how to make parking enforcement more efficient and equitable.

## Why do people receive parking tickets?

Across the three cities, Portland issued the most parking tickets—more than 468,000 between 2018 and 2019, compared with about 430,000 in Minneapolis and 250,000 in Austin. Most parking tickets were issued for meter-related violations, which accounted for nearly 70 percent of Austin's total tickets during that period.

Consistent with prior analyses, we also found most parking [tickets were issued in downtown areas](#) and [other commercial corridors](#). Downtown neighborhoods typically have a higher density of offices, shops, and restaurants, which can mean fewer free parking spaces and higher visitor turnover daily. In Austin, the two downtown census tracts with the most parking citations comprised 37 percent of the total number of citations issued in the city. In Portland and Minneapolis, they comprised 25 and 21 percent.

## Tract Level Map of Parking Ticket Total Amounts in Minneapolis, 2018–19



Created with Datawrapper

Source: Authors' calculations.

In addition to meter violations, tickets were issued for parking in a no-parking zone, failure to display current registration, and parking within 15 feet of a fire hydrant. And there were also city-specific tickets, with a relatively large share of tickets tied to winter parking restrictions in Minneapolis.

## What's the actual price of a parking violation? And how many go unpaid?

Between 2018 and 2019, the average parking ticket ranged from \$35 in Austin to about \$80 in Minneapolis and Portland. In terms of revenue, Austin collected \$8.7 million from parking violations, compared with around \$37 million in both Minneapolis and Portland. Overall, Minneapolis issued more than one parking ticket per city resident and had the highest amount cited per resident (\$89) across the three cities.

Tickets often include not just “base fines,” but various fees and surcharges to cover administrative costs, most bearing no relation to the severity of the offense. In Minneapolis, the total cost of a parking violation includes a base fine, a \$12 parking surcharge, and a \$3 law library fee. But we were unable to separate each city's ticket components (fine versus fee versus surcharge) in our data.

Stacked fees can make parking tickets much more expensive and, because ticket amounts typically don't account for people's ability to pay, can contribute to court debt.

Of the cities we studied, only Austin provided data on *outstanding* parking ticket amounts. As of September 2022, more than \$2 million in outstanding tickets were owed to the city, accounting for about 23 percent of the total tickets issued between 2018 and 2019.

Prior research from [Chicago](#); [DC](#); [Durham, North Carolina](#); [Las Vegas](#); and [Los Angeles](#) (PDF) have shown that parking tickets can disproportionately affect areas where more families with lower incomes reside, disproportionately Black communities.

In our preliminary analysis of parking ticket incidence against the composition of census tracts by race, ethnicity, and income, we didn't find significant ticketing disparities in Austin, Minneapolis, and Portland. However, further information is needed to fully understand the equity implications of parking tickets.

## What can stakeholders do with these data?

Our analysis shows that hundreds of thousands of parking tickets are issued in cities every year. This can amount to more than one ticket issued per resident, costing hundreds of dollars for certain parking violations. But many tickets also go unpaid.

To alleviate some of those burdens without significant impact on city revenues, the evidence suggests policymakers and advocates can explore reforms such as amnesty programs, payment plans for those least able to pay, and forgiveness of old court debts.

Though the publicly available data illustrate the scale and geographic dispersion of tickets across cities, they're insufficient to answer the next set of critical questions, such as who is getting ticketed the most, how many tickets go unpaid and why, and whether tickets stem from poor signage or lack of other transportation options.

As local policymakers and advocates embark on [fines and fees reforms](#), better and more granular data could improve parking enforcement and ease financial burdens from tickets.

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