

# Income Extraction via the Criminal Legal System: A Community-Level Perspective

Sarah K. S. Shannon<sup>1</sup> , Ryan Larson<sup>2</sup> , Ian Kennedy<sup>3</sup> ,  
Kate K. O'Neill<sup>4</sup> , and Alexis Harris<sup>5</sup>

## Abstract

Legal financial obligations (LFOs) are financial penalties imposed by U.S. criminal courts that generate disproportionate negative effects for poor and minoritized individuals and communities. In this visualization, the authors use court administrative data for all criminal cases in Washington and Minnesota from 2010 to 2015 to measure community-level income extraction via LFOs in Seattle and Minneapolis-St. Paul. Unlike previous measures of LFOs at the community level, the authors calculate the proportion of income in a given census tract that is extracted in the form of LFOs. This operationalization makes it possible to ask, given a tract-year's existing income per capita, what proportion of that income went toward LFOs from cases sentenced. The authors' maps demonstrate that disadvantaged communities pay a higher share of their income in LFOs compared with more advantaged neighborhoods, perpetuating social control and poverty at the neighborhood level.

## Keywords

legal financial obligations, punishment, poverty, neighborhoods

Legal financial obligations (LFOs) are financial penalties (e.g., fines, fees) imposed by U.S. criminal courts at all levels (Harris, Pattillo, and Sykes 2022). Research demonstrates that LFOs generate disproportionate negative effects for poor and minoritized individuals and communities (Harris 2016; O'Neill, Kennedy, and Harris 2021). LFOs fit within a broader constellation of extractive neoliberal financial practices that cluster at the neighborhood level and siphon economic resources from subjugated communities, including payday lending and subprime loans (Page and Soss 2021; Soss and Weaver 2017).

O'Neill et al.'s (2021) analysis measured LFO burden as average fine and fee amounts sentenced per capita at the census tract level to demonstrate how LFOs saddle neighborhoods with fiscal penalties, reproduce racial inequalities, and perpetuate poverty. Their measure does not distinguish between debt that is paid or unpaid, and thus does not capture community-level income extraction (hereafter "income extraction") via LFOs. Here we measure income extraction as the proportion of each neighborhood's average income paid toward LFOs, with average LFO amounts paid per capita as the numerator and income per capita as the denominator. Our measure better captures an important and understudied

dimension of legal debt: income extraction via the criminal legal system, specifically LFOs, and its impact on neighborhood well-being.

We use court administrative data of all criminal cases in Washington and Minnesota from 2010 to 2015. To create our measure of income extraction, we geocode each case using addresses of persons convicted and aggregate paid LFO amounts to the tract level and merge these data onto tract-level American Community Survey 2015 estimates of per capita income. Bivariate maps (Figure 1) visualize spatial patterns in income extraction via LFOs using U.S. Census Bureau Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing boundary files.

<sup>1</sup>University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

<sup>2</sup>Hamline University, Saint Paul, MN, USA

<sup>3</sup>University of Illinois Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

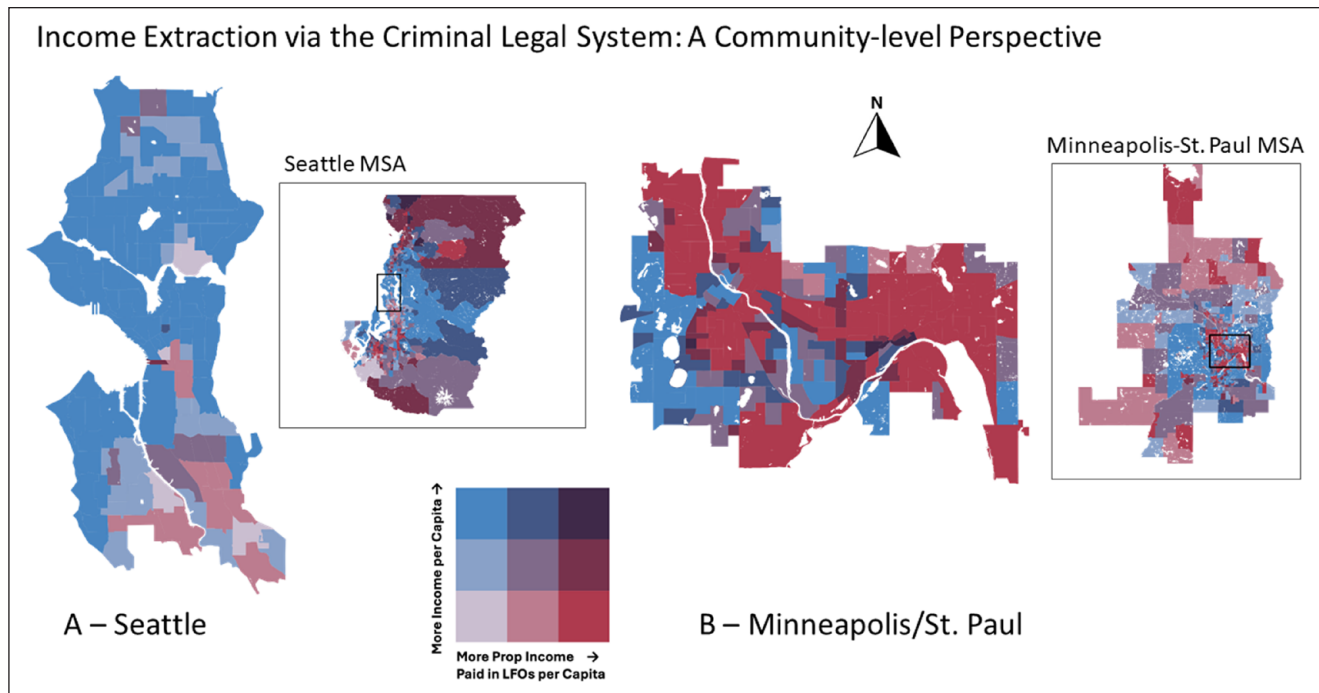
<sup>4</sup>University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA, USA

<sup>5</sup>University of Washington, Seattle, WA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Sarah K. S. Shannon, University of Georgia, Department of Sociology, 113 Baldwin Hall, Athens, GA 30602, USA  
Email: sshannon@uga.edu





**Figure 1.** Income extraction via legal financial obligations in (A) Seattle, Washington, and (B) Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota: proportion of per capita income paid in legal financial obligations by census tract.

Note: Data were obtained from the Washington State Administrative Office of the Courts (AoC), the King County District Courts (KCDC), the Minnesota State Court Administrator's Office (SCAO), and the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS). These bivariate choropleth maps display the spatial distribution of the proportion of census tract per capita income paid in legal financial obligations (LFOs) alongside per capita income. Insets show metropolitan areas.

Figure 1 shows bivariate choropleth maps of the Seattle (Figure 1A) and Minneapolis-St. Paul (Figure 1B) central cities with metropolitan statistical area (MSA) insets. Tracts are shaded by MSA-specific 33rd and 66th percentiles of income extraction ( $x$ -axis) and per capita income ( $y$ -axis). Because as neighborhood income goes up, proportion paid to LFOs goes down, most tracts are shaded along the diagonal from the upper left to the lower right of the legend.

The maps illustrate key differences between the two cities. Minneapolis-St. Paul shows a classic pattern whereby disadvantaged tracts on the north and south sides of Minneapolis and central St. Paul experience higher income extraction via LFOs. In Seattle, gentrification has pushed poorer populations out of the city (Hwang 2020). Housing is so expensive there that fewer low-income areas persist (Collins 2019), but several higher extraction tracts are longstanding underresourced neighborhoods. The MSA insets show some commonalities. Peripheral tracts in both MSAs have high levels of income extraction via LFOs. Blue shaded areas in both MSAs are generally wealthier suburban neighborhoods with low rates of income extraction.

These maps visualize income extraction across two U.S. cities, demonstrating that disadvantaged tracts pay a higher share of their income in LFOs compared with more advantaged tracts. Our income extraction measure captures the

disproportionate extraction of LFOs from poor and minority neighborhoods, that is, how the criminal legal system draws “blood from stones” (Harris, Evans, and Beckett 2010) and perpetuates social control and poverty.

### Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by a grant to the University of Washington from Arnold Ventures (Alexes Harris, principal investigator). Partial support for this research came from a Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development research infrastructure grant (P2C HD042828) to the Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology at the University of Washington.

### ORCID iDs

Sarah K. S. Shannon  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7192-5850>  
 Ryan Larson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2349-7510>  
 Ian Kennedy  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2684-1935>  
 Kate K. O'Neill  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5967-4841>

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## References

- Collins, Chuck. 2019. "Who Is Buying Seattle? The Perils of the Luxury Real Estate Boom for Seattle." Washington, DC: Institute for Policy Studies.
- Harris, Alexes. 2016. *A Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as a Punishment for the Poor*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Harris, Alexes, Heather Evans, and Katherine Beckett. 2010. "Drawing Blood from Stones: Legal Debt and Social Inequality in the Contemporary United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 115(6):1753–99.
- Harris, Alexes, Mary Pattillo, and Bryan L. Sykes. 2022. "Studying the System of Monetary Sanctions." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 8(1):1–33.
- Hwang, Jackelyn. 2020. "Gentrification without Segregation? Race, Immigration, and Renewal in a Diversifying City." *City & Community* 19(3):538–72.
- O'Neill, Kate K., Ian Kennedy, and Alexes Harris. 2021. "Debtors' Blocks: How Monetary Sanctions Make Between-Neighborhood Racial and Economic Inequalities Worse." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 8(1):43–61.
- Page, Joshua, and Joe Soss. 2021. "The Predatory Dimensions of Criminal Justice." *Science* 374(6565):291–94.
- Soss, Joe, and Vesla Weaver. 2017. "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race-Class Subjugated Communities." *Annual Review of Political Science* 20:565–91.

## Author Biographies

**Sarah K. S. Shannon** is a Meigs Distinguished Professor of Sociology and director of the Criminal Justice Studies Program at the University of Georgia. She studies systems of criminal punishment and their effects on social life, including monetary sanctions, incarceration, juvenile justice, and collateral consequences of felony convictions. Her interdisciplinary research has been published in top journals in several fields including sociology, criminology, public health, social work, and geography. Her work has also been cited in high-profile media outlets and by policy makers. She is an award-winning teacher and cofounder of First Publics, an online community of practice centered on teaching as an essential form of public sociology.

**Ryan Larson** is an assistant professor of criminology at Hamline University. He has a PhD and an MA in sociology from the University of Minnesota. His research explores how the varied

forms, intensities, and social contexts of punishment affect aspects of social life and crime. His work expands upon how punishment, in part, reproduces inequalities by race, place, and crime using quantitative and computational methodologies. His current projects examine the community-level health effects of police violence, the confluence of criminal legal and child support debt, and the impacts of punishment on neighborhood structure. His research has been published across many peer-reviewed sociology, criminology, and social science outlets, as well as public facing outlets such as The Sentencing Project.

**Ian Kennedy** is an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Illinois Chicago. They are a computational social scientist trained working at the intersection of race, digital platforms, and text analysis. Their work aims to contribute to understandings of how contemporary racism, sexism, and transphobia work, in both visible and less visible ways. This means looking for data in new places, such as in Craigslist rental ad text, by developing new uses for large-scale administrative data, or curating large samples of Twitter data linked to election misinformation, or through analysis of millions of reddit comments. They are committed to producing useful work beyond scholarly publications, working with groups such as the Northwest Justice Project to identify illegal Craigslist ads or with the Election Integrity Partnership to monitor misinformation during the 2020 election.

**Kate K. O'Neill** is an incoming assistant professor at the University of Iowa and a postdoctoral researcher with the Collective to Study the Broad Reach and Burden of Monetary Sanctions. She holds an MSc in the sociology of crime, control, and globalization from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a PhD in sociology from the University of Washington. She uses critical and criminological perspectives to understand how delinquency, crime, and the criminal legal system reproduce gender and race inequalities. Her research has been published across peer-reviewed sociological, criminological, and social psychology outlets and referenced by lawmakers and journalists in support of ongoing policy and social justice initiatives.

**Alexes Harris** is the Presidential Term Professor and a professor of sociology at the University of Washington. Her research fundamentally centers on issues of inequality, poverty and race in the United States' criminal legal systems. Her book *A Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as a Punishment for the Poor* details the ways in which sentenced fines and fees often put an undue burden on disadvantaged populations and place them under even greater supervision of the criminal justice system.