

DEBTORS' PRISON FOR KIDS?

The High Cost of Fines and Fees in the Juvenile Justice System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While much is now known about the financial burdens imposed on individuals and families by the assessment of costs, fines, fees, and restitution in the adult criminal justice system, there has been scant attention paid to this issue in the juvenile justice system. To address this gap, with the support of the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, Juvenile Law Center : 1) reviewed statutes in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to assess the legal framework for financial obligations placed on youth in the juvenile justice system and their families; 2) conducted a national survey of lawyers, other professionals, adults with previous juvenile justice involvement, and families to collect information about local practices;¹ 3) interviewed attorneys and young adults who had experiences with the juvenile justice system to further understand how cost of justice issues play out in practice; and 4) solicited a study by criminologists Alex Piquero and Wesley Jennings, who examined the connection between costs and recidivism, and the implications for racial disparities in the juvenile justice system.

As in the criminal justice system, the imposition of costs and fees in the juvenile justice system is widespread across the country. Approximately one million youth appear in juvenile court each year. Costs, fees, fines, or restitution are imposed in every state. **These financial penalties increase recidivism, push impoverished young people deeper into the juvenile justice system, exacerbate racial disparities in the juvenile justice system, and heighten economic and emotional distress for families already struggling financially.**

The chart below identifies the types of financial obligations imposed and the results of our statutory review and stakeholder survey. In some cases, costs are imposed locally even when there is no applicable state statute. In a forthcoming report, we will consider the additional costs that are imposed when indigent youth are required to pay for counsel.

¹ We received responses from 183 individuals in 41 states; in each of these states, respondents reported the imposition of costs, fines, fees or restitution, and harms to youth or families as a result.

NATIONAL OVERVIEW OF COSTS IMPOSED

TYPE OF COST	STATES WITH A STATUTE AUTHORIZING OR REQUIRING THE COST	STATES WITH PRACTICE OF IMPOSING COSTS (BASED ON SURVEY RESULTS FROM 41 STATES)
Court costs	25	28
Evaluation and Testing	32	26
Probation and Supervision	21	18
Diversion	22	26
Cost of Care	47	31
Fines	43	29
Expungement	11	20
Restitution	50+DC	All

The inability to pay costs, fines, fees, or restitution often results in harsh legal consequences and contributes to financial stress and family tension. In the 41 states with survey respondents, participants widely affirmed that youth experience these consequences for failure to pay:

- Case remained open longer (33 states²)
- Youth was sent to juvenile justice placement (26 states)
- Youth remained in juvenile placement longer than he/she otherwise would have (26 states)
- Additional court visits, leading to missed school or missed work (34 states)
- Inability to get records expunged (24 states)
- Civil judgment imposed (25 states)
- Formal petition filed for failure to pay diversion costs (15 states)

Additionally, respondents in 31 states reported that families took on debt in order to pay their juvenile justice-related financial obligations.

² For each consequence, at least one survey respondent in this many states reported the designated consequence. More often, numerous respondents in each state reported the designated consequence.

Our statutory research also revealed significant consequences that we had not posed as survey questions, but which we believe are also widely imposed and require further study. These include:

- Probation extended
- Probation revoked
- Driver's license revoked, suspended, or child barred from applying for license
- Arrest warrants issued
- Child deprived of needed treatment
- Youth or parents held in civil or criminal contempt
- Interest fees, collection fees, or other additional fees or fines for failure to pay

Until now, almost no empirical research has investigated the effect of financial costs imposed on juvenile offenders and the extent to which such costs contribute to recidivism or their potential impact on racial disparities in the juvenile justice system. Criminologists Alex Piquero and Wesley Jennings used data from a cohort of 1,167 adolescent offenders in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania to examine 1) how demographics and case characteristics relate to financial penalties imposed by the justice system and 2) the degree to which such monetary penalties are related to recidivism in a two-year follow-up.

Their analysis showed that financial penalties in general—and the sheer amount of financial penalties in particular—significantly increased the likelihood of recidivism, even after controlling for relevant demographics and case characteristics. They also concluded that owing costs upon case closing is significantly related to recidivism. Their analysis suggests that cost and fee policies may contribute to racial disparities in the juvenile justice system as children of color are more likely to owe costs upon case closing relative to their white peers. Moreover, 94% of youth in their sample—over 1,000 youth in just one county—owed costs, fines, fees, or restitution.

While this report focuses on a problem—the imposition of costs on youth and families who cannot afford to pay—it also highlights solutions and identifies jurisdictions that are changing their local or state policies to ensure that the youth are not punished for poverty.

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