

#DEBTFREEJUSTICE IS A NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO ABOLISH FEES AND FINES IMPOSED ON YOUTH IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM.

WHO WE ARE

The Debt Free Justice campaign launched on September 23, 2021. DFJ aims to center and support system-impacted individuals and youth-led organizations in providing strategy and feedback to accomplish our mission of abolishing juvenile fines and fees in all 50 states.

EXECUTIVE STEERING COMMITTEE

- Juvenile Law Center
- The National Center of Youth Law
- The Policy Advocacy Clinic at Berkeley Law
- Arnold Ventures
- Schusterman Family Philanthropies

WHAT WE DO

WE SUPPORT COMMUNITY-DRIVEN EFFORTS AT THE LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL LEVELS THROUGH POLICY ADVOCACY, LITIGATION, AND RESEARCH. IN 2021, WE SUPPORTED LEGISLATIVE EFFORTS IN 15 STATES. AS WE EXPAND, WE'LL CONTINUE TO HOLD YOUTH CONVENINGS AND LISTENING SESSIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY.

POLICY ADVOCACY



We work with grassroots organizations and local advocates to change state laws and local policies regarding the imposition of fees and fines in the justice system. We also provide technical support, including sample legislation, research, and fiscal analyses, to local partners and campaigns.

LITIGATION



We file lawsuits on behalf of youth and their families when they are being charged unconstitutional or otherwise illegal fees and fines. We also support public defenders and other attorneys with the representation of youth by assisting with appellate and amicus briefs.

RESEARCH



We provide research to advocates and attorneys working to eliminate fees and fines, including research on the impact that fees and fines have on youth and their families, fiscal research, and research on the impact of ending fees and fines.

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FEES & FINES 101

Courts can charge youth in the justice system and their families thousands of dollars in fees and fines. Thousands of young people across the United States find even modest dreams of a decent job and a life without endless debt almost impossible to attain as a result of debt imposed by the justice system.



WHAT ARE FINES & FEES?

The majority of states across the nation impose fees and fines on youth and their families when they become involved in the justice system.

FEES

Courts and other system actors can charge fees to youth and their families for simply coming into contact with the justice system, along with fees for court-ordered services, including diversion programs, ankle monitors, and even incarceration.



\$1,796

The average amount in administrative fees billed to a young person and their family in Dane County, Wisconsin, in 2018. [source](#)

UP TO \$500

The amount of the fine imposed on juveniles and their parents in San Antonio, Texas, for ordinance violations like being out in public between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m. on any day and between 9 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. on school days. [source](#)



FINES

Courts can impose fines on youth for certain infractions, including ordinary teenage behavior like staying out past curfew, underage drinking, or skipping school.

“ ***Our families are caught in an unending spiral. The current policy just increases recidivism. It also causes inequity when one family can afford to pay and another cannot.*** ”

- Louisiana State Rep. Royce Duplessis, whose state in 2021 eliminated all juvenile fees



WHY ABOLISH FINES AND FEES?

For most youth in the justice system whose families are struggling financially, fees and fines can be devastating, and the young person is likely to become trapped in the system and experience lifelong negative consequences. Fees and fines also disproportionately impact Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth and families. At its core, this is both a racial and an economic justice issue.

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HOW FEES & FINES HARM YOUTH, FAMILIES, & COMMUNITIES

YOUNG PEOPLE WHO CAN'T AFFORD TO PAY ARE LIKELY TO BE TRAPPED IN THE SYSTEM & SET UP TO FAIL

- Young people can face extended probation and court visits, the inability to obtain a driver's license, or even incarceration.
- They could face civil judgments, tax and wage garnishment, liens on property, and bankruptcy.
- Debt can impact their credit and eligibility for student loans, rental leases, or car loans.



FAMILIES FACE INSURMOUNTABLE FINANCIAL BURDENS

- Families often have to choose between paying off these debts or paying for essentials like groceries or rent.
- A young person's inability to pay can lead to years of escalating debt and additional punitive consequences, including their own incarceration.



FEES AND FINES UNDERMINE ENTIRE COMMUNITIES

- The higher the financial charge, the higher the rate of recidivism.
- The practice is punitive.
- The practice undermines community safety.
- Jurisdictions spend more money collecting fees and fines than they actually bring in as revenue.



\$360M

The amount of juvenile fees collectively owed by tens of thousands of California families before the state canceled the outstanding debt in 2020. [source](#)

“

We gained an understanding of how harmful juvenile court debt can be to families and that it can actually be a barrier to treatment and rehabilitation.

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—Macomb County, Michigan, Circuit Court Judge James Biernat Jr., whose court in 2021 eliminated juvenile fees

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