

Cost of Collections Estimate Guide and Case Studies

We created this guide as part of a series of resources to support community advocates in building state and local campaigns to abolish youth fees and fines by sharing strategies from Debt Free Justice (DFJ) campaigns. See more resources at debtfreejustice.org/resources.

This is a guide to estimating the cost of collecting fees, fines, and restitution in their state that includes [background](#) and tips for [data collection](#), [calculating the cost of collections](#), and [framing](#). If you have questions about this resource, write to info@debtfreejustice.org.

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Background

Why Calculate the Cost of Collections?

- When pursuing youth fee and fine elimination, opposition can stem from concerns about losing court revenue (or perceived concerns). Measuring the costs of collections can help address stakeholder concerns and illustrate the inefficient and often costly impact that fees and fines have on governments. Remember, this is an estimate. It's okay if it's not perfect.

Where Can I See Examples of How Other DFJ Campaigns Calculated the Cost of Collections?

- Below are case studies on how past DFJ campaigns have collected data and estimated the cost of collections in a state.

How to Estimate the Cost of Collections

In this section, we'll walk you through the three key steps for estimating the cost of collection:

1. [Data Collection](#)
2. [Calculating the Cost of Collections](#)
3. [Framing Your Estimate](#)

Step 1: Data Collection

Data Points You're Looking For

Personnel costs are the biggest expense in the costs of collections and, therefore, the primary data point we recommend searching for. There may also be other direct costs (supplies, etc.) and indirect costs (internet, phones, office space, etc.). The next section describes how to find personnel and other costs.

Data	What You're Looking For
Personnel (highest % of costs)	Personnel costs include costs for wages and benefits of those collecting fees and fines. Who collects youth fees and fines? How many people are involved? What are their job titles? What is the cost of employing people to collect youth fees and fines? What are the wages, benefits, and overhead costs?
Time Spent	How much time is spent on collecting youth fees and fines? What percentage of a person's job responsibilities is collecting youth fees and fines? How many hours per week, month, or year is spent on collections by a person or department?
Amount Collected	How much is collected from youth fees and fines? This is useful when creating cost comparisons or calculating the efficiency of fees and fines (e.g., 75% of total revenue is spent on collections), but is not necessary to calculate the cost of collections.

Data Collection Strategies

Consider these three strategies used in previous DFJ campaigns, listed in order of effectiveness, for guidance and inspiration. Each state's legal system structure, data availability, and reporting practices vary. You may be able to gather data through other methods depending on what is available in your state and the connections your campaign has. Read on for more details on each strategy.



[Informal/Formal Data Requests](#): Start by asking the courts or agencies involved in collections for data via an informal request or a formal public records law request.



[Surveying](#): If you don't receive sufficient data in response to your public record requests, consider surveying folks involved with collecting youth fees and fines.



[Budget Analysis](#): If you can't do surveys or the survey data you receive isn't sufficient, you can look for data in government budget documents, which are publicly available online.



Informal/Formal Data Request

Requesting data on the cost of collection from courts or agencies can be a straightforward way to find a data point drawn from government data without having to do your own calculations. **Start with informal conversations with stakeholders involved with collecting youth fees and fines to find out what data is already available.**

NOTE: Cost of collections data is usually one item in a public records request (PRR) related to youth fee and fine assessments, collections, and policies. See the [DFJ Public Records Request Guide and Template](#) resource at debtfreejustice.org/resources for more information on PRRs in past campaigns.

See the Arizona [case study](#) below on requesting public records to estimate the cost of collections.

Tips for Requesting Public Records Related to Cost of Collection

- **Make a broad request and give examples.** Ask for data on the cost of collection broadly. Include examples of what that could look like (i.e., job descriptions, salaries, or budget statements). Be clear about which fees and fines you’re researching. The following is example language for a formal PRR:

Financial cost of assessing and collecting juvenile fees: Records relating to the amount spent on assessing and collecting juvenile fees by Probation and/or other county departments, for example, budget statements and/or job descriptions specifying how much time is or how many resources are spent by collections staff, probation staff, or any other parties involved in assessing and collecting juvenile fees.
- **If they say they don’t track the cost of collections, ask for specifics.** The most likely response is that the court or agency doesn’t track the cost of collections, which is significant and still valuable information for your campaign. Follow up to ask for the number of full-time employee (FTE) hours spent on collections efforts and the salaries or wages for those FTEs.
 - **Informal estimates are still valuable.** You can also simply ask the person you’re in touch with how much time (hours or percentage) they spend on collections. Use that information to inform assumptions in your calculations. For example, if a clerk tells you they spend approximately 5% of their time on collections, you can generalize this to assume that all people in their position spend about 5% of their time on collections.
- **Seek out data on “child support” collections.** Some states may use the term “child support” to describe foster care maintenance payments collected from parents of youth ordered to serve time for a delinquency charge. How much the state spends to collect “child support” for youth in detention is valuable data for your campaign. This information might come from different agencies. See more on this [below](#).
- **If they don’t provide a number but do provide documentation, calculate the cost yourself.** You can estimate collection costs if they share job descriptions and salaries. See below for guidance on how to [calculate the cost of collections](#).

- **If they give you a number, use that number.** This is the best-case scenario, especially if the number is favorable. If you think the number is wrong, you can fact-check it using the methods described in the rest of this memo.

Case Study: Submitting County Public Records Requests in Arizona

The campaign submitted formal public records requests to the clerk of court for each county in Arizona. See how this data was used in the campaign's fiscal memo at debtfreejustice.org/resources.

Primary Data Collection Method

- Public Records Requests to all 15 counties in Arizona (browse debtfreejustice.org/resources to see the Arizona public record request example).

Primary Data Collected

- Annual cost of assessing and collecting youth fees, according to the counties (browse debtfreejustice.org/resources to see examples of the Arizona public record request responses)
- Amounts assessed and collected, used to calculate cost of collection as a percentage of revenue

Calculations

1. Four counties provided researchers with statements of the actual cost of collecting juvenile delinquency fees. The campaign used data on the amount of fees collected in each county (county revenue) to estimate collection costs as a percentage of fee revenue.

$$[\text{Cost of collection} / \text{County revenue}] \times 100 = \text{County collection costs as a percentage of fee revenue}$$

These percentages ranged from 65% to 106%.

2. The advocates then calculated the average of those percentages, 85%. This key figure allowed them to estimate that Arizona counties spent about 85 cents on collection costs for every \$1.00 collected in youth fee revenue. This figure, 85%, also allowed them to estimate the cost of collections statewide.
3. The campaign already had data on 2019 statewide revenue from youth fees, which was \$1,686,842. Advocates used that statewide revenue to estimate the annual cost of collections by multiplying it by the 85% cost of collections rate found above.

$$\text{Cost of collections statewide} = (\text{State revenue}) * 85\%$$

This came out to an estimated \$1,433,815 in annual statewide collection costs for youth fees or 85 cents spent on collections for every dollar collected.



Surveying

Another strategy for collecting cost of collections data is to circulate surveys to people and agencies responsible for collecting youth fees and fines. This strategy is more viable if you have access to a listserv or point of contact who can help circulate your survey and follow up with individual counties.

See the [case study](#) below on a survey estimate of the cost of collections.

NOTE: Questions related to the cost of collections are sometimes included in a more general survey on youth fee and fine assessments, collections, and policies. Browse debtfreejustice.org/resources to see examples of surveys for system actors used in past DFJ campaigns.

- **Ask what county or judicial district they work in.** You'll need to know what county they work in so you can transform your county- or district-level estimates into a statewide estimate using population data.
- **Ask for their job title.** This information will help you find out their salaries online.
- **Ask how much time they spend collecting youth fees and fines.** This is the most important question to get answered. To encourage respondents to answer this question, give them examples of responses and avoid being overly prescriptive on how they should respond. Make the response field open-ended so respondents can write in whatever they'd like in response to this question. The following is an example question for the survey:

How much time is spent collecting juvenile fees and fines per month in your county, and by whom? (E.g., 5 hours per month of two probation officers' time, 10 hours per month of a clerks' time, and one hour per month of a juvenile court judge's time)

- **Seek sufficient responses.** This means having a solid number of survey responses from a variety of respondents. You don't need every county to respond to extrapolate, but you want to make sure the costs of collection numbers in your estimate have regional and political diversity. Additionally, for example, if you only get one response to your survey, you may not want to highlight it. If you want to highlight a single response to one of your questions, be transparent about that, i.e., "One clerk in X county said they spend X% of their time collecting youth fees and fines." (More details on working with survey data will be available in a forthcoming guide on surveying.)

Case Study: Surveying County Juvenile Court Administrators

The Juvenile Court Administrators Association distributed a survey to court administrators in a DFJ state campaign. The campaign team shared the data in a memo that was shared with the legislative committees considering the bill.

Primary Data Collection Method

- Survey to Juvenile Court Administrators

Primary Data Collected

- County name
- Job titles
- Hours of work collecting youth fees and fines

Data from Supplemental Research

- County population: Advocates found the county population sizes online.
- Benefits: Advocates found that benefits accounted for 38% of employer compensation costs and wages and salaries accounted for 62% for state and local government workers, according to [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS).
- Salaries: To find the salaries for each survey respondent, the team searched their names or job titles on [GovSalaries](#), [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), [Government Jobs](#), and [National Center for State Courts](#). They also searched some county websites for salaries in job title postings.

Calculations

1. Some respondents left the “hours of work” question blank. The advocates calculated an average number of hours/month based on other respondents and entered that for respondents who left that question blank (this was an assumption they made). (More details on working with survey data will be available in a forthcoming guide on surveying.)
2. To calculate the total employer contributions for each respondent, the advocates multiplied each salary by 1.61, the “benefits multiplier” from the BLS.
3. Then the formula below was used to find the annual cost of collection for each of the survey respondents.

$$\text{Annual cost of collections per respondent} = \frac{\text{Total employer contributions per respondent}}{2080 \text{ Annual hours of work}} \times \text{Hours of work from survey} \times 12 \text{ Months}$$

4. The advocates totaled the annual costs of collections per respondent to give them the annual cost of collections for the total survey sample.
5. The advocates then totaled the county populations for the counties represented in the survey and found that this represented approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ (0.305) of the state population.
6. This allowed the advocates to take the total annual cost of collections per respondent and multiply that by 3.05 to estimate the annual cost of collections for the state.



Budget Analysis

Another strategy for collecting cost of collections data is to analyze the budgets of agencies responsible for collecting youth fees and fines. This strategy works best if you already know which personnel or specific units/departments are primarily responsible for collecting youth fees and fines (e.g. probation officers, county clerks, or dedicated collection officers). Watch this webinar from Fees & Fines Justice Center for more about what a budget book is and how to read one: [How to Read a Government Budget \(Book\)](#)

Case Study: Judicial Department Budget in Colorado

Colorado has staff called Collections Investigators who have the specific role of collecting fees and fines. This made finding the cost of staffing via the judicial department’s budget cleaner than in some other states. See how this data was used in the Colorado fiscal memo example at debtfreejustice.org/resources.

Primary Data Collection Method

- State Budget Research via Judicial Department’s Budget [Request](#)

Primary Data Collected

- Number of full-time Collections Investigators (CIs)
- Wages and benefits of CIs
- Operating costs of the Judicial Branch

Data from Supplemental Research

- Operating costs: Advocates found that in a [memorandum](#), the Legislative Council Staff estimated standard operating costs of \$950 and capital outlay costs of \$4,703 per new judicial support staff FTE (total of \$5,653). They used \$5,653 as a conservative estimate of the non-personnel (operating costs) costs per FTE for Collections Investigators.

Calculations

1. To calculate the total operating costs for Collections Investigators, advocates multiplied the number of CIs by the operating costs per CI.

$$101.7 \text{ (Number of CIs)} \times \$5,653 \text{ (Operating costs per CI)} = \$574,910 \text{ (Total operating costs for Collections Investigators)}$$

2. Advocates then totaled wages, benefits, and operating costs for CIs to get the total collection cost.

$$\text{Total Collections Investigator wages and benefits} + \text{Operating costs} = \text{Total collection costs for all juvenile and criminal legal fees and fines}$$

3. The advocates assumed that Collections Investigators spend 5% of their time collecting youth fees and fines. They multiplied the total collection costs by 5% to get an estimate for the statewide collection costs of collecting youth fees.

$$\text{Total collection costs for all juvenile and criminal legal fees and fines} \times 5\% \text{ (assumed time spent collecting youth fees)} = \text{Statewide collection costs of collecting youth fees}$$

Step 2: Calculate the Cost of Collections

- **Remember, this is an estimate.** It's okay if it's not perfect.
- **When you don't have information on how much time is spent on collections, make an assumption.** If you have a job description, review it to make an informed guess about how much time a person in that position spends on collections. Consider which staff or which departments are involved in collecting juvenile fees.
 - If an entire department is devoted to collecting all youth and adult court fees, fines, and restitution, you might assume that 5% of that department's staff time is spent on youth fees and fines alone.
 - If a position works exclusively with youth (e.g., juvenile probation officers) or is primarily responsible for collecting youth fees and fines or enforcing payment, you might assume a higher percentage.
- **Keep it simple.** Try to keep your assumptions and calculations simple so that someone else can check your work and so that you can easily explain how you got your number if asked.
- **Use job titles to find salaries.** Once you know a government employee's job title, you can often look up their salary. The following websites allow you to search by job title to access salary information: [GovSalaries](#), [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), [Government Jobs](#), and [National Center for State Courts](#). States or local news organizations may have additional databases.
- **Use salaries and a "benefits multiplier" to calculate the total employer costs.** Check the latest [BLS data](#) to get a "benefits multiplier" using federal data. A benefits multiplier is what you can multiply a wage or salary by to get the total employer costs to employ a position.

Calculating a Benefits Multiplier Using the Magic of Algebra

In 2023, according to [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), benefits accounted for 38% of employer compensation costs, and wages and salaries accounted for 62%.

Say	$T = \text{Total employer contributions};$
	$W = \text{Wages and Salaries}; B = \text{Benefits}$
Then, generally	$T = W + B$
BLS data gives us this expression	$W = 0.62T$
Get T in terms of W	
Divide both sides by 0.62	$W / 0.62 = 0.62T / 0.62$
Simplify the expression	$(1 / 0.62)W = T$
	$1.61W = T$
This gives us a benefits multiplier	1.61

Step 3: Frame Your Findings

- **Remember the point you’re trying to make.**
 - **You want to show that the cost of collections is high.** Artificially shrinking your cost of collections estimate to try to be overly conservative doesn't make your calculations seem more rigorous or reasonable.
- **Read how others have framed the cost of collecting fees and fines.** Many DFJ campaigns describe their cost of collections findings and calculations in a fiscal memo. Browse debtfreejustice.org/resources to see examples of fiscal memos used in past DFJ campaigns.
 - In some cases, the percentage of revenue spent on collections was more compelling than the cost of collections number alone.
- **Be explicit about assumptions and guesses:** You’ll likely have to make assumptions and guesses to estimate the cost of collections. This estimate is stronger when you’re explicit about those assumptions and guesses. Being transparent about the figures you use in your arguments helps your campaign's credibility.
- **Explain how your number is an underestimate.** There are likely other costs to the state that you did not account for in your calculation.
 - Usually, [multiple agencies are involved in collections](#), i.e., police, sheriffs, public defenders, detention facilities, probation and parole officers, DMV, and state tax agencies.
 - If nonpayment of fines and fees constitutes a probation violation in your state, there are additional costs (e.g., the cost of a revocation hearing, the cost of an additional X months of probation supervision).

Bonus Calculation: Cost of a Hearing for Unpaid Debt

In some states, a young person who is only on probation for unpaid debt may have a review hearing every 60-90 days. Even if a court hearing lasts only 10 mins, that’s 10 mins of the judge’s time, bailiff’s time, air conditioning, etc. Use personnel data on people involved in the hearings, the number of youth on probation, and the average amount of time on probation to estimate the cost of a review hearing for unpaid debt.

- **Highlight state and/or county transparency issues.** When you cannot come up with a cost of collections estimate because the data isn’t tracked or wasn’t provided, that is still compelling. When a state won’t provide any data on the cost of collections, that is compelling in itself. Highlight that the state either doesn’t track or poorly tracks the cost of collections, which is a red flag especially when revenue is low.
- **Contextualize the cost of collections within other individual, community, economic, and societal costs associated with youth fees and fines:** Collections costs are just one of the costs to the state associated with youth fees and fines. Remind your audience of the collateral consequences of fees and fines (e.g., costs to the state economy of someone having to miss a day of work to take the bus to go to the courthouse) and of the potential cost savings from eliminating them (e.g., keeping money in the pockets of low-income families). See the [DFJ Fiscal Impact Memorandum Guide and Template](#) resource at debtfreejustice.org/resources for more guidance on how to do this.