

CITIES AND COUNTIES FOR **FINE AND FEE JUSTICE**

Roadmap to Bold and Equitable Fine and Fee Reform



THE FINANCIAL
JUSTICE PROJECT
SAN FRANCISCO



FINES & FEES
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CENTER



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1.0

Introduction

Over the last decade, 1 in 3 Americans have been impacted by fine and fee debt, forcing many to give up food, rent, and other basic needs just to pay them off. Ineffective and egregious court fines and fees practices cannot be fixed with a single, new law or policy — they look different in every community. Meaningful reform must happen at both the state and local level.

Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice is a national leadership network supporting local government and advocacy leaders to move meaningful fine and fee reforms that work better for people and for government. Through the network, cities and counties have a unique opportunity to lead local teams that advance cutting-edge policies, engage with experts and peers from across the country, and catalyze a national movement of cities and counties that are implementing practical and impactful models of reform, which can be replicated by other jurisdictions.

This guide is a resource for anyone interested in fine and fee reform, particularly leaders in cities and counties who are eager to address the widespread challenges presented by excessive fines and fees in their jurisdictions.

“When those traditionally absent from policymaking drive the process, smart, sustainable strategies emerge.”

1.1 Local Problems, Local Solutions

State and local governments have become increasingly reliant on fines and fees as potential revenue sources. Fines and fees have increased in size and severity, and often exceed people's ability to pay them. [Local governments](#) also increasingly attempt to fund their operations through steep fines and fees, which many people cannot afford to pay.

While the financial impacts of fines and fees can often be experienced by people as one cumulative debt burden, there are important differences between these two costs and often require different solutions.

Fines are monetary punishments for doing something that is against the law. They are often intended to be a less severe punishment than going to jail. In some cases, a person can receive both jail time and a fine.

Fees are costs charged to people moving through the justice system and are attached to everything from minor traffic tickets, to 'free' public defenders, and even emergency medical care when you're in jail. The sole purpose of a fee is to generate revenue.

The often unintended yet insidious impact of this practice is the perpetuation and deepening of poverty. A large portion of people in the United States do not have the ability to pay outstanding fines and fees, and many of them are living [paycheck to paycheck](#). When people cannot pay fines or fees, a cascade of consequences can unfold. [Late fees are added](#), [credit scores are impacted](#), [access to housing](#) and [employment is diminished](#), and, in many places, [driver's licenses are suspended](#). People can even be [jailed for nonpayment](#). Research also suggests that metropolitan areas that rely more on revenue from fines and fees experience [more police killings](#). Fines and fees disproportionately impact low-income people and people of color. Thus, fines and fees can make government a driver of inequality, not the equalizer that it should be.

Charging people fines and fees is often a "lose-lose" for people and for governments— governments gain little from attempting to collect these fines and fees because people often cannot afford to pay. The [Conference of State Court Administrators](#) has long advocated that state and local courts must be funded through stable state appropriations, rather than revenues from fines and fees. In 2023, the [Department of Justice](#) reissued updated guidance warning state and local courts to end discriminatory and unconstitutional fine and fee practices and detailed the case law on the assessment

and imposition of fines and fees. In it, the Department cautioned:

[1] In addition to raising serious legal and practical concerns, assessment of unaffordable fines and fees often does not achieve the fines' and fees' stated purposes. In many cases, unaffordable fines and fees undermine rehabilitation and successful reentry and increase recidivism for adults and minors. And to the extent that such practices are geared toward raising general revenue and not toward addressing public safety, they can erode trust in the justice system.

Across the country, city and county leaders are recognizing the urgent need to address this problem and are advancing bold reforms to ensure their fines, fees, and other financial penalties do not place a disproportionate burden on low-income residents and people of color. These leaders are implementing reforms that advance racial equity, make a difference in the lives of residents, increase economic prosperity, and are feasible for government to implement. The local officials driving these reforms are united by several core beliefs:

- **It is possible to hold people accountable without putting them in financial distress.**
- **People with lower incomes should not face more severe consequences than middle- and upper-income residents.**
- **Governments should not balance their books on the backs of their most distressed communities.**

The 2008 recession was a catalyst for many cities and counties to turn to fines and fees to try to balance their budgets, further harming residents who were already struggling to make ends meet. Although the economy rebounded in many ways, many people in the United States were still struggling. The COVID-19 crisis created unparalleled hardships for both governments and individuals across the country, and the crisis created even more urgency to prioritize fine and fee reform.

Individuals in poverty are disproportionately affected by criminal justice policies, such as fines and fees, which can trap them in a cycle of incarceration and debt. Our goal through Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice is to support local leaders interested in fine and fee reform and this roadmap can guide places to protect vulnerable citizens in a sustainable, equitable way.

Local Solutions → State Solutions

Local reform efforts can have a significant impact on state-level reform. Reforms at the city or county level have demonstrated the impact and effectiveness of eliminating a fee or shifting away from penalizing non-payment, which can inspire lawmakers to pass statewide legislation.

For example: San Francisco was the first county to eliminate all locally controlled criminal administrative fees. Several counties, including Alameda, Contra Costa, and Los Angeles, followed suit. This local work has led to successful state legislation; in 2020, the passage of AB 1869 eliminated these fees statewide and waived \$16 billion in associated debt.

1.2 Equitable Fine and Fee Reform

Equity— the just and fair inclusion into a society in which all can participate, prosper, and reach their full potential—is a pragmatic approach to solving the nation’s greatest sources of tension: economic inequality and racial exclusion. Equity addresses race forthrightly and productively, but it is not about benefiting one group at the expense of another. When the wisdom, voice, and experience of those traditionally absent from policymaking—often low-income people and people of color—drive the process, profound policy transformations and smart, sustainable strategies tailored to the needs of the most vulnerable communities emerge, improving outcomes for all.

Equitable approaches and impacts should be considered throughout fine and fee reform work and incorporated in at least two important ways:

1. Ensure that individuals and communities most directly impacted by fines and fees are meaningfully represented in all phases of your reform work, including assessing your jurisdiction’s use of fines and fees, prioritizing the fines and fees to address, developing and passing specific policies, and implementing and evaluating those policies.
2. Conduct a [racial equity impact assessment](#) of any policy you intend to advance. In other words, analyze all potential impacts of the policy to ensure that the communities that are most impacted will not be affected adversely.

Employing an equity framework is the best way to promote a more fair and smart policy approach and to guard against unintended consequences. It increases buy-in from the

communities you are serving and helps protect the impact you seek from pervasive, often unseen, biases built into systems and mindsets.

Understanding your local poverty rates

Understanding specific poverty rates and the unique economic conditions in a locality allows for tailored solutions to meet the unique needs of different communities.

The [Federal Poverty Level](#) (FPL) is calculated by the federal government using a formula developed in the 1960s based on what people spent on food. The FPL is the same across the 48 contiguous states; it does not take into account geographic differences, and it has been criticized as being outdated. In recognizing the limitations of the FPL, it is now common to see agencies discussing incomes at 300% or 400% of the federal poverty level when making determinations based on poverty.

However, when it comes to working with local jurisdictions to create policy or ability to pay assessments, FFJC recommends using [HUD’s Very Low Income Limit](#), which is calculated at the state and local levels and accounts for the varying range of incomes, rents, and some other expenses. FFJC also encourages local jurisdictions to use significantly higher ranges and thresholds to account for the underestimation of the cost of living in those figures.

In 2020, The San Francisco Superior Court and Financial Justice Project (FJP) launched [MyCitations](#), an online ability-to-pay tool, that allows people with low incomes or who receive public benefits to request a significant discount (up to 80% or more) on their traffic court citations.

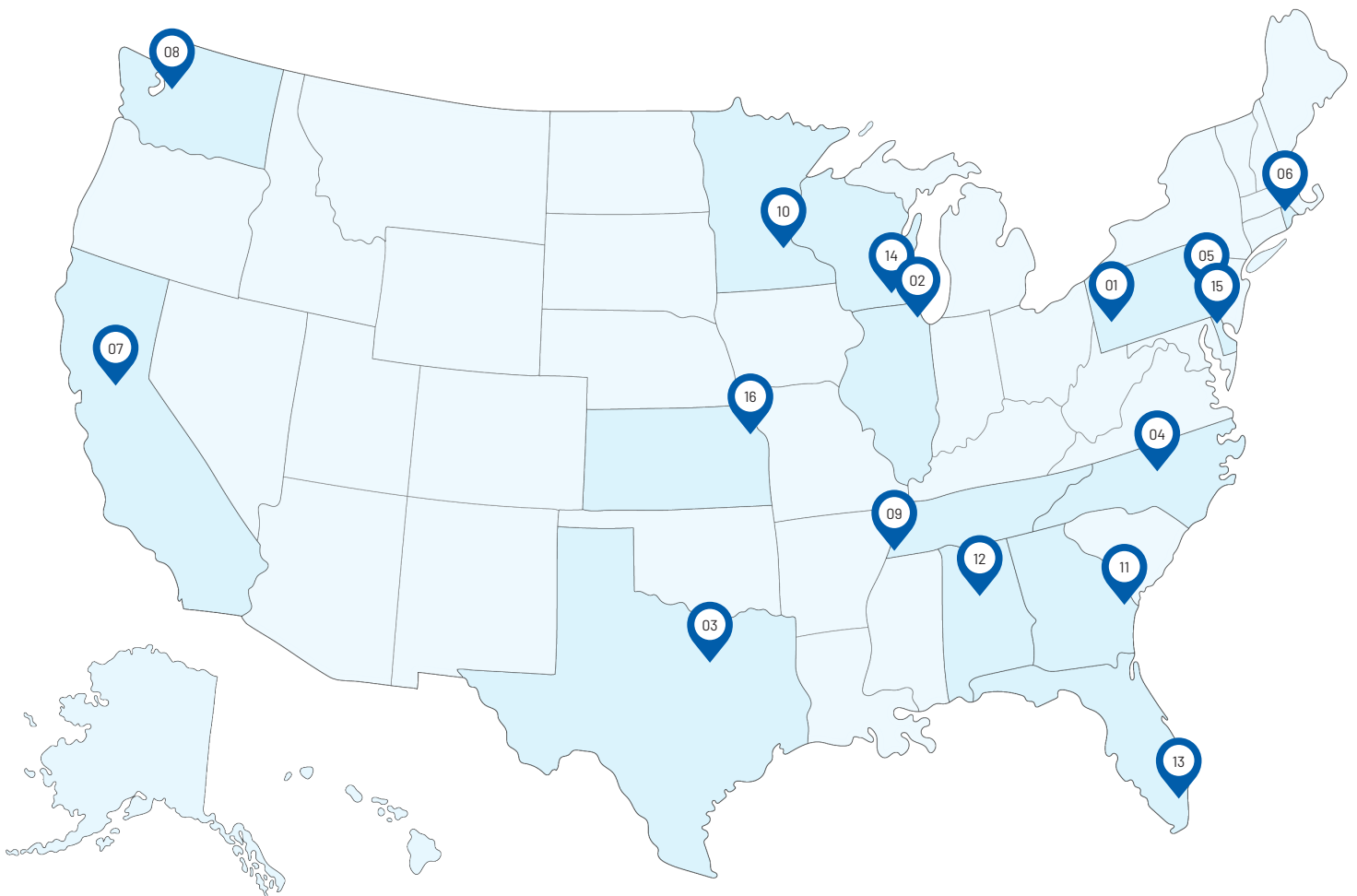
The City of Chicago created the [Clear Path Relief Program](#) to assist individuals with incomes under 300% of the FPL to reduce or eliminate certain kinds of vehicle-related debt, including parking, compliance, red light, and speeding tickets.

1.3 Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice

Three organizations, Results for America, the San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the Fines and Fees Justice Center, have combined their expertise to create Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice (CCFFJ). CCFFJ supports localities working to develop and implement policies that make a difference in the lives of low-income residents. To date, CCFFJ has led 16 local teams to innovate and implement more fair and just policies that reform fines, fees, tickets, and financial penalties, which often have an adverse and disproportionate impact on low-income people and people of color. Learn more about their reforms below:

[2021 CCFFJ Impact Report](#)

[2023 CCFFJ Impact Report](#)



- | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|
| 1. Allegheny County, Pennsylvania | 7. Sacramento City and County, California | 12. Jefferson County, Alabama |
| 2. Chicago, Illinois | 8. Seattle/King County, Washington | 13. Miami-Dade County, Florida |
| 3. Dallas, Texas | 9. Shelby County, Tennessee | 14. Washtenaw County, Michigan |
| 4. Durham, North Carolina | 10. St. Paul, Minnesota | 15. City of Wilmington, Delaware |
| 5. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania | 11. Chatham County, Georgia | 16. Wyandotte County/City of Kansas City, Kansas |
| 6. Providence, Rhode Island | | |



2.0

Developing and Enacting a Fine and Fee Reform Agenda

This section outlines the basic elements for local leaders to assess and reform fines and fees in their jurisdictions:

- Building your team
- Conducting a fine and fee assessment
- Developing a fine and fee reform plan
- Enacting and implementing reforms

In some cases, a team may already exist or a jurisdiction might have already completed certain elements and/or have the authority and opportunity to pass reforms before all elements are complete. We encourage all local leaders, however, to carefully review this section to ensure that all considerations—particularly those related to equity and community engagement—have been assessed and implemented.

Best Practices

Several reports by the [San Francisco Financial Justice Project—San Francisco Fines & Fees Task Force: Initial Findings And Recommendations](#) and [Advancing Financial Justice in San Francisco: The Experience and Lessons of the City's Financial Justice Project](#)—describe the project's work to accomplish the elements outlined in this section and model valuable best practices. A full list of reports from The Financial Justice Project, including reports on specific programs and reforms, can be found [here](#).

2.1 Building Your Team

Building a team that includes a wide range of government and community stakeholders and diverse perspectives is a foundational element of any reform effort. There are numerous strategies for building a successful team for fine and fee reform; here are a few key approaches:

Dedicated reform team members. Fine and fee reform efforts require several critical tasks, including data collection, fiscal analysis, community engagement, strategic communications, and sometimes legal research and analysis. Your team should include members who can perform one or more of these tasks.

Ensure your team has the capacity and authority needed to advance specific reforms. If possible, teams should recruit members with the authority and/or influence to change policies and/or processes. Examples could include elected city council members or county commissioners, judges, prosecutors, or city managers.

Identify key government stakeholders. Multiple government agencies, departments, branches, and offices may have essential information and/or authority. Their work and budgets may also be impacted by your reform efforts. If they are not willing or able to join the teams, at a minimum try to obtain their support for your efforts.

Engage budget and finance leaders. Fines and fees may have real or perceived impacts on local budgets. Engaging budget and finance leaders will help them understand all fiscal impacts of fine and fee reform (both costs and benefits) and underscore the positive wellness and economic impacts to communities as a result of the fiscal change.

Connect with court leaders, prosecutors, and law enforcement agencies. Departments that directly oversee the imposition of fines and fees, such as transit, law enforcement, and court leaders play a key role in these efforts.

Impacted individuals and community-based organizations. Reform teams and government stakeholders should work together with impacted individuals and community members who are best positioned to understand the real-world impact of fines and fees. These individuals are critical to developing effective policy and implementation. They may also serve as a bridge to similarly situated community members who can act as powerful advocates for your reform agenda.

To truly be equitable, the inclusion of impacted individuals and communities must be authentic and meaningful. Teams should develop structures and processes to ensure that the voices and ideas of impacted individuals are centered in decision-making; these structures should include access considerations, such as meeting times, language, cultural responsiveness, disability, and technology.

Washtenaw County Highlight: Judicial Administrative Reform

Leaders in Washtenaw County, MI collaborated with and learned from justice-impacted individuals to develop a judicial administrative policy to eliminate criminal legal system fees. These fees included a \$60 fingerprint fee, \$1,611 in court costs, and a \$650 attorney fee for individuals who qualify for assigned counsel—fees that amount to roughly 12% of the total annual earnings for the county's lowest-income residents. Over 400 individuals have had these court costs waived in the first 12 months of the policy, saving the community over \$924,000. View this short [video](#) or read [here](#) to learn more.

2.2 Conducting a Fine and Fee Assessment

Research shows that [court-imposed debt creates hardships for working families](#) across all racial groups, political affiliations, and income levels. Approximately 1 in 3 Americans have been directly affected by fines or fees related to traffic, criminal, juvenile, or municipal court over the past decade. As a result, at least **17 million households with children have likely experienced shortfalls in food, housing, healthcare, or other essentials because a parent was saddled with court debt.**

Assessing your jurisdiction's fines and fees is a critical part of the equitable reform process. Fines and fees can be opaque and their individual and aggregated impact on communities may be unknown to many within government. A fine and fee assessment can help your team develop a better understanding of the universe of fines and fees your jurisdiction is imposing, as well as the impact fines and fees have on communities and government. The assessment process can also provide an opportunity to begin building relationships with internal and external stakeholders who may be critical to the success of your reform efforts.

As a first step, your team should review the landscape of successful reforms from across the country—found in Appendix A to this guide and in the Fines and Fees Justice Center’s [Clearinghouse](#)—to determine whether similar fines and fees exist in your jurisdiction.

A fine and fee assessment consists of four essential elements:

1. Community engagement
2. Examining authority
3. Government stakeholder engagement
4. Fiscal analysis

Community engagement

A critical step of the assessment process is engaging impacted individuals to understand which fines and fees are causing the most harm and need to be addressed first. We recognize that this work is defined by its across-the-board urgency, but we know that sustainable success relies on strategic decision-making with an eye toward medium and long-term reform efforts. It is also important to understand how imposing and collecting fines and fees impacts real people. When done effectively, the community engagement process will yield valuable information about fines, fees, and collections practices while fostering trust and building relationships with community members. Strategies for meaningfully engaging the community include the following:

Clarify your mission and purpose. For people or entities that are engaging impacted communities for the first time, it is critical to reset implicit power dynamics and explicitly acknowledge histories of marginalization and disempowerment. Be clear about your initial understanding of the ideal short and long-term policy reform goals, and the role you see for impacted communities and advocates in achieving those goals.

Collaborate with trusted organizations serving impacted individuals. Identify organizations that serve and have gained the trust of impacted individuals and communities. Such organizations might include faith-based institutions, legal services agencies, reentry organizations, homelessness service providers and advocates, criminal justice reform advocates, and grassroots organizations working with impacted individuals. Jurisdictions should work with the organizations identified to determine how best to engage individuals and communities, and how those organizations themselves can remain engaged, to the extent they want to be, as you move forward.

Strengthen the capacity of community-based and grassroots organizations to participate. Many community-based and grassroots organizations have limited resources and capacity. Where possible, teams should provide financial support and work with those organizations to secure additional resources that could enhance their ability to play an effective role in the community-engagement process.

Address barriers to meaningful community participation.

Many impacted individuals face financial and other barriers to participating in the policy reform process. A lack of childcare, for example, may prevent a parent from participating in an after-hours community meeting. Inadequate translation services may discourage participation by impacted non-English speakers. Working with community partners, reform teams should identify and address the unique and specific barriers to communities in your jurisdiction. Set aside time early in the engagement process to allow for directly impacted people to articulate what they need to get and stay engaged – evening meetings due to employment constraints? Child or elder care support? Meetings in locations that are most accessible and comfortable for all community members? These are just a few examples of the many ways you can gather input from impacted communities and the organizations that serve them to tailor your outreach and engagement strategies. Jurisdictions should also provide creative ways to increase community input, like using technology, art, storytelling, social media, and/or video. Simple, engaging approaches can build trust and relationships, leading to deeper and more meaningful community participation.

Turn engagement into leadership. Engaging with and listening to directly impacted community members, even when done authentically, will lead to more harm than good if those community members are excluded from the actual reform and decision-making processes. Ensure that community members have the opportunity to attend agency or board hearings, legislative meetings, and other elements of your work. Include them in press releases, bill signings, and media opportunities. It is critical that you prioritize speaking with and not for impacted communities, and that they retain their voice, agency, and dignity throughout their engagement.

In addition to having staff on the ground in New Mexico, [FFJC uses models of reform which place those directly impacted by fines and fees policies within a central advisory role.](#) Together with the Advisory Board, FFJC is able to develop an in-depth understanding of the needs

of New Mexico's impacted communities and identify the key touch points that create undue hardship. In addition to issue identification, board members are instrumental in providing oral testimony, message development, data collection, and outreach.

Examining authority

No jurisdiction is likely to have the authority to modify every fine or fee impacting its residents. Therefore, teams must assess who has the authority to reform any fines or fees under consideration. This information will help identify and target reforms and determine whether collaboration with officials at other levels of government is necessary to advance these reforms.

Jurisdictions may incorrectly assume that certain fines and fees are only controlled by the courts or state law. Conducting basic research is important to accurately determine what authority your team and its allies may have. You should start by consulting government personnel, such as a city attorney or county counsel, to help with the necessary research and analysis.

Another strategy is to partner with an academic institution or other nonprofit organization to research legal authority.

For example, a law school may be willing to analyze your jurisdiction's authority to modify identified fines or fees. Partnering with these types of institutions may lead to additional capacity for other research needs as well.

The Fines and Fees Justice Center has also conducted a series of 50-state analyses on specific kinds of fees, outlining the statutory authority for imposing them in each state. These reports may be a useful starting point, but they are in no way exhaustive of what may exist in your jurisdiction. These reports, along with several from other national organizations, can collectively be found on the [End Justice Fees Campaign](#) website.

Questions to ask when assessing authority:

- Is the fine or fee established under state law or local ordinance?
- Is the fine or fee discretionary or mandatory? If discretionary, who has the discretion?
- Are there any existing administrative orders or policies relating to the fine or fee?



Government stakeholder engagement

The next critical step is for teams to gather basic information regarding the fines, fees, and collection practices that are within the local jurisdiction's authority. Fines or fees that community members are struggling with may be managed or collected by different government departments or agencies and levels of government. Similarly, revenue generated from fines and fees may be distributed across departments. It is important to remember that this can often be an interdepartmental issue. Who assesses, who collects, and where the revenue goes does not have to exist within one department or agency.

Jurisdictions should seek the following information from relevant agencies and departments:

INFORMATION ON EACH FINE OR FEE		
	Information Needed	Use for Reform
Identification & Assessment	Name and description of the fine or fee	Clarify the specific fines and fees under review and establish a baseline for analysis.
	How the fine/fee is assessed	Determine the methods of assessment to identify any inconsistencies or biases in application.
	Ability to pay process (if applicable)	Assess the fairness of payment options and determine the need for more equitable processes.
	Consequences of late payment or nonpayment	Identify punitive measures that may be excessive or harmful and consider alternatives.
Financial Data by Fine or Fee	Dollar amount of each imposed fee and fine vs. revenue collected	Evaluate the financial impact on the community and identify opportunities for adjustment.
	Number of fines/fees issued and amount imposed (last fiscal year)	Analyze issuance patterns to assess fairness and potential overuse of certain fines or fees.
	Number of distinct individuals paying the fine/fee and amount paid (last fiscal year)	Understand who is paying and how much to identify disproportionate impacts on specific populations.
	Percentage of fines and fees paid on time	Gauge the efficiency and fairness of current payment compliance and adjust policies accordingly.
	Amount of outstanding debt	Recognize the scale of unpaid fines/fees to develop targeted debt relief or amnesty programs.
	Demographic data of individuals assessed the fine/fee (last fiscal year)	Examine demographic data to understand and address disparities in the imposition of fines/fees.
Collection Practices	Who manages the collections of the specific fines/fees	Identify responsible parties for collection management to streamline processes and accountability.
	Use of private or public collection mechanisms (e.g., wage garnishment, tax intercepts, private debt collectors)	Evaluate collection methods to determine if more ethical or efficient alternatives exist.

OVERALL INFORMATION ACROSS ALL FINES & FEES		
	Information Needed	Use for Reform
Overall Financial Data	Total revenue collected from fines and fees (last 2–5 fiscal years)	Understand overall revenue to evaluate the fiscal dependency on fines and fees.
	Total amount of outstanding debt	Determine total unpaid amounts to assess the need for changes in collection policies or practices.
Overall Collection & Management	General practices for managing and allocating collected funds across departments	Review management practices to find opportunities for cross-departmental collaboration or policy alignment.
	Summary of collection practices and types of mechanisms used	Analyze overall collection practices to identify areas for policy reform or improvement.
Total Costs of Collection Data by Fine or Fee	Expenses paid to third-party debt collectors	Assess the cost-effectiveness of using third-party debt collectors and consider alternatives.
	Cost of government staff time for collections	Calculate staff time costs to determine the resource burden of collections on government personnel.
	Cost of related in-court proceedings	Evaluate court costs to identify potential savings through alternative dispute resolution methods.
	Cost to parole and probation systems for fee and fine enforcement	Assess costs to parole and probation systems to find alternatives that reduce administrative burdens.
	Cost of processing license suspensions or tax offsets	Calculate costs related to processing to identify inefficiencies and areas for reform.
	Cost to law enforcement for warrant enforcement or arrests	Review law enforcement costs to consider less punitive alternatives and reduce expenses.
	Costs associated with incarcerating individuals for nonpayment	Identify costs of incarceration to highlight the financial and social impacts of nonpayment penalties.
	Costs to public defender systems for addressing client fees and fines	Examine the costs to public defenders to advocate for more equitable legal practices and fee structures.

Two reports, [The Steep Costs of Criminal Justice Fees and Fines](#) and [Cost of Injustice: How Criminal System Fees Are Hurting Los Angeles County Families](#), provide more context on the true cost of collecting fines and fees.

It is likely not possible to collect all of the information suggested in the above list, but the lack of perfect information should not stop jurisdictions from moving forward with reform—rather, jurisdictions should collect as much information as possible from government partners and flesh out the picture by hearing from directly impacted community members. You may also want to build in data collection or reporting into new legislation, if possible.

Strategies for gathering information from government stakeholders include the following:

- **Secure buy-in from relevant government stakeholders early in the process and consider bringing them to the table.** Invite agencies or departments that assess or collect fines or fees to join teams or otherwise engage them early in the reform process to secure important buy-in. Creating partnerships early on will aid in securing necessary information and collaboration.
- **Engage and build relationships with relevant government staff through the information gathering process.** Staff may be able to provide insights and context that cannot be gleaned solely from reviewing data and documents, such as information about how a fine or fee is actually imposed by the government. The internal information-gathering process also offers an opportunity to build relationships with people in departments or agencies who may have expert knowledge about fine and fee systems.
- **Leverage existing government processes or authority to secure information.** Teams should examine whether there are existing processes to secure information about fines or fees. For example, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project partnered with the Mayor's Budget Office to solicit information about fines and fees assessed by each department through the annual budget process. Along with each department's proposed budget, each department was asked to submit information about the fines and fees that they assess and collect, including much of the data described above. A review of this data with the department and the Mayor's Budget Office has led to the [elimination or adjustment of many fines and fees over the past several years in San Francisco, including criminal administrative fees, animal care and control fees, medical examiner fees, and other permit fees](#). Jurisdictions may also consider using the authority of the executive or legislative branches to require that relevant agencies provide information regarding fines and fees.

Fiscal analysis

Using the information gathered during the assessment, teams should conduct an analysis to understand the true budget impact of each fine and fee assessed, including understanding how much revenue is collected and where those dollars go, the costs of collections and collections rate, and any collateral consequences, such as arrests for

failure to appear or lost revenue due to suspended driver's licenses.

The goal of a fiscal analysis should be to understand:

- How dependent the government actually is on fines and fees to fund public functions
- How much revenue is budgeted and collected, relative to the resources that must be spent on collecting assessed fines and fees and addressing the collateral consequences (such as the cost of incarcerating people who are arrested for failure to pay fines and fees owed, or increased need for social safety net services due to financial instability caused by fines and fees)
- What the true impact would be (and for which agencies) if a particular fine or fee revenue stream was eliminated.

Once you gather the information recommended above in the "Government Stakeholder Engagement" section, you can use some or all of the below analyses to identify which fine or fee revenue streams are particularly **volatile** (change unpredictably year to year, which is bad for stable budget planning), **inefficient** (the amount of revenue that is actually brought in requires an outsized amount of resources to maintain the fine/fee system), and/or **unreliable** (revenue is decreasing over time or is coming in consistently below budgeted projections.)

- What is the ratio of collected to assessed dollars? Low ratios signal inefficient revenue streams.
- What is the ratio of collected (actuals) to budgeted dollars (projections)? Low ratios signal unreliable revenue streams.
- How has collected revenue changed over time? (use percent change formula) Decreases over time signals an unreliable revenue stream; sharp increases and/or decreases in multiple years signals a volatile revenue stream.
- Ratio of total fine and fee dollars collected to total General Fund, total relevant agency budget, or total jurisdiction budget – low ratios signal that fine and fee revenue is a drop in the bucket for government and likely will not create a significant impact if eliminated.
- For each fund where fine or fee revenue is deposited – how much fund balance has accumulated in this fund over time? (try to find fund balance reporting documents to check this) High fund balance signals that the revenue is not actually being used fully to cover spending, and therefore is not necessary to maintain at current budgeted levels.)

Resources to help you navigate your fiscal analysis:

- FFJC Budget Webinar Series, designed to help fine and fee advocates harness the power of budgets for their advocacy efforts:
 - Episode 1: [How to Read a Budget \(Book\)](#)
 - Episode 2: [How to Analyze a Fiscal Note](#)
 - Episode 3: [Following the Money: Fine and Fee Revenue Streams](#) (this one may be most relevant for your fiscal analysis work)
 - Episode 4: [Follow the Money: Finding Fines and Fees Revenue Streams](#)
- Vera Institute: [“How to Use Budgets to Understand Criminal Justice Fines and Fees”](#)
- Check your local budget book for a budget cycle explainer specific to your jurisdiction: google “[your jurisdiction name] executive budget book FY2024” and look in table of contents for a section called something like “Process Explainer” or “Budget Cycle”



2.3 Developing a Fine and Fee Reform Plan

Teams should work closely with other community partners and government stakeholders to consider the following key questions and target specific fines or fees for a reform agenda. Once teams have selected specific fine and fee targets, they should identify the reform approach for each target.

- Was the fine or fee identified as harmful by impacted individuals and community members?
- Does the fine or fee exacerbate existing racial and socioeconomic disparities or lead to inequitable outcomes?
- Does the fine and/or the underlying “offense” for which it is imposed accomplish an important government purpose? Could the “offense” be decriminalized or legalized?
- Does the net revenue from the fee justify the harm it causes?
- Does a one-size-fits-all fee or fine make sense?
- What is the financial impact of the fine or fee on government? Is your jurisdiction spending as much or more to collect the fee as it is taking in?
- Is implementing the fine or fee a good use of government resources? Or could those resources be deployed, to greater benefit, elsewhere?
- What are the revenue implications of eliminating a fee or decriminalizing or adjusting a fine?



While fines and fees both frequently fail to achieve their intended purposes and often undermine them, it is crucial to understand the distinct roles fines and fees play in developing an effective reform strategy. Fines are intended to punish certain behaviors, yet they can inadvertently penalize poverty and undermine justice goals. Fees, on the other hand, function as regressive taxes that disproportionately burden those with the least financial means, often resulting in barriers to compliance and perpetuating inequality.

To address these issues, the following sections will clarify the distinct nuances of fines and fees, and highlight how tailored reform approaches can mitigate the harmful effects of each.

Fines

A fine is intended to be the punishment for a violation of the law. Fines are often disproportionately imposed on and collected from low-income individuals and people of color.

One solution is to [stop sanctioning, policing, or criminalizing](#) the conduct in question and to eliminate the fine. For example, recognizing that routine traffic stops can result in disparate outcomes, the Ann Arbor Michigan City Council passed a [Driving Equality Ordinance](#). Under the law, unless there's an immediate risk of harm, police are prohibited from stopping anyone for non-safety-related offenses such as a cracked windshield, loud exhaust, tinted windows, an object hanging from a rearview mirror, a broken tail light or issues with registration stickers and plates.

If the fine serves a critical public safety purpose, cities and counties should consider whether they can equitably impose the fine.

For each fine, teams should consider the following:

- What is the underlying policy goal for this fine? Is the fine proportionate to the underlying behavior it is intended to punish,
- Is the fine tailored to the individual's ability to pay? [Ability to pay](#) determinations at the point of sentencing are crucial to ensure fines are equitably imposed.
- Does the fine in and of itself satisfy the punitive goal? Are there protections against compounding punishments? For instance, sentencing someone to pay a fine in addition to serving time in jail, prison, or on probation.
- Is there an alternative to the fine that can accomplish the same goal? For example, if someone has a broken tail light – the goal is to get it fixed. If a person does not know the light is out or simply can't afford to get it fixed, a fine will not accomplish the goal of having an operating tail light.
- There are alternatives to fines, but they will typically fit within the community service construct. The definition and opportunities for community have expanded over the year. Jurisdiction should evaluate their community service options and ensure these alternatives are feasible for individuals to satisfy.

Reform Options

- Reconsider sanctioning, policing, or criminalizing certain conduct
- Income-based fine models
- Alternatives to fines, such as compliance or community service
- Conduct an Ability to Pay Determination to ensure that fines are assessed equitably
- Ordinance Review and Cleanup

Ability-to-Pay Assessments

CCFFJ advocates for the elimination of all fees imposed in the criminal legal system and for the imposition of fines only in cases in which the sentence does not include a term of incarceration or supervision. If imposed, fines should be both tailored to the offense and proportionate to an individual's financial circumstances. Further, no fines or fees should ever be assessed in juvenile cases. However, until these reforms can be achieved, meaningful ability to pay determinations remain our next best tool towards achieving fairness and equity.

An ability-to-pay assessment is the evaluation of an individual's ability to pay a fine, fee or other monetary sanction. These assessments ensure that fines are proportionate and offer an interim solution for jurisdictions that have not yet eliminated all of their fees.

Payment Plans

After a court conducts an ability-to-pay assessment, and appropriately waives and or reduces the amount owed, reasonable payment plans are necessary to ensure that people can meet their own needs, as well as the needs of their families, while paying off their court debt. Payment plans are also useful in jurisdictions that lack the authority to consider an individual's ability to pay.

Community Service

Texas enacted an [expansive definition](#) of community service to include credit for job skills training, obtaining a GED, self-improvement programs, and drug or alcohol treatment.

Community service offers individuals an alternative to monetary sanctions that better meet the community's interest in public safety and accountability. When chosen by the defendant, assigned in consideration of an individual's family, work, or education obligations, credited at a reasonable amount, and defined broadly, community service may offer an appropriate way to comply with monetary sanctions.

Fees

Across the country, the legal system – including ordinance enforcement, and criminal and traffic courts – imposes fees on individuals to raise revenue to fund its operations and other government expenses. These fees include penalties, surcharges, assessments, and other costs that bear no relation to punishment for an offense or to public safety. Instead, these fees function as regressive taxes, disproportionately extracting revenue from those least able to pay.

Fees imposed by the criminal legal system are often unrelated to one's conviction and may be

assessed anywhere from pre-trial to post-conviction. Even those who are not convicted or have their cases dismissed may be required to pay fees.

Reliance on fees is an inefficient, harmful, and also [unsustainable way to fund government](#), requiring more crime to balance budgets.

Reform options:

- Eliminate the fee
- Fund courts through general revenue
- Debt write-off

In every case, teams should consider eliminating the fine or fee and determine whether other policy interventions that do not cause harmful impacts on communities can accomplish a policy goal. Fees should not be utilized in the criminal-legal context and any existing fees should be eliminated. Teams should consider eliminating fees in other contexts as well, particularly if they disproportionately impact low-income individuals or people of color.

Read more about this in our [First Steps Toward More Equitable Fines and Fees Practices](#).

“Reliance on fees to fund government is harmful, unsustainable, and often requires more crime to balance budgets.”

2.4 Enacting and Implementing Reform

Teams must work closely with impacted individuals, community partners, and government allies to develop and advance a persuasive case for reform. Individuals who have been impacted by fines and fees have a unique and valuable experience to draw upon and can help determine the biggest pain points and possible solutions.

Additionally, the most persuasive cases for reform often come from the stories of individuals and families struggling with the burden of fines and fees. Teams should ensure that impacted individuals who are willing and interested have the opportunity to share their stories in support of reform. Impacted individuals may testify at key hearings or meetings with government stakeholders. The team may need to provide travel support and/or stipends to help impacted individuals attend hearings and meetings. Jurisdictions should also explore creative ways to help impacted individuals share their stories, including using video.

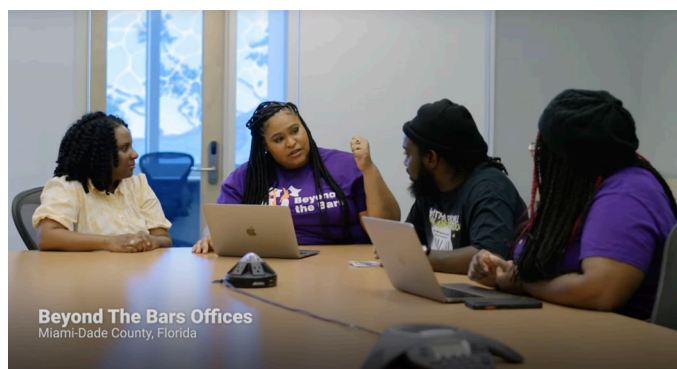
Government agencies and departments can also serve as powerful advocates for reform efforts and will be key to implementation, particularly in cases where they have the authority over the target fine or fee. Teams should leverage relationships built throughout the reform process to enlist government stakeholders in the advocacy process, including providing supportive testimony in key hearings.

Successful implementation of reforms will require clear communication with all stakeholders, including government agencies and courts, impacted communities, law enforcement, and legal services, to ensure widespread awareness of any changes. Working with government and community partners, as well as local media, will be important to maximize outreach and education.

By following this guide, we hope that Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice will continue to provide the environment for teams to develop effective, innovative, and equitable approaches to address the harm caused by unjust fines and fees.



[How Washtenaw County Led On Fine and Fee Reform — Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice](#)



[How Miami-Dade County Led on Local Fee Elimination — Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice](#)

3.0

Appendix A: Examples of Local Fine and Fee Reform

The following examples of local reforms are presented to inform and inspire other city and county officials who are working to assess and reform their fines and fees.

Fines

Wilmington, Delaware

City Council passed an [ordinance](#) to reduce parking tickets from \$40 to \$25 if paid within 14 days. Additionally, Wilmington City Council created a Fines and Fees [Taskforce](#) to review fees, fines, and administrative sanctions administered by the City, make findings, and submit recommendations to City Council. (2023)

Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago City Council passed an [ordinance](#) lowering the down payment required to enter into payment plans for city tickets, decreasing penalties for the late payment of city sticker tickets, reinstating a 15-day grace period after city stickers expire (allowing more time for compliance), ending the practice of issuing same-day or consecutive-day tickets for compliance violations, and [offering an amnesty program](#) for debt resulting from city sticker tickets. (2019)

San Francisco City and County, California

[The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency and The San Francisco Financial Justice Project \(FJP\) developed a payment plan](#) to help low-income residents pay parking tickets or other citations. Under the [low-income payment plan](#), residents earning below 200% of the federal poverty level can now pay \$5 to start a monthly payment plan, have their late fees (which can double the cost of the citation) waived, and opt to enroll in community service to pay off their citations. During the first three months after the new payment plan was established, plan enrollment increased by 400%; revenue collected also increased. (2018)

The San Francisco Superior Court and Financial Justice Project (FJP) launched [MyCitations](#), an online ability-to-pay tool, that allows people with low incomes or who receive public benefits to request a significant discount (up to 80% or more) on their traffic court citations. Traffic tickets in California can exceed \$400, so this reduction can be worth hundreds of dollars. (2020)

The San Francisco Human Services Agency and FJP worked together to create a cloud-based income verification database to make it easier for departments to provide discounts on fines and fees for people with lower incomes. The updated verification tool allows departments to ask individuals whether they would like to streamline their application process by looking up whether they have already been certified as eligible for certain safety net programs, relieving the applicant from the burden of submitting additional proof to qualify for the discount. (2018)

Municipal Fines

The San Francisco District Attorney's office, in collaboration with the Financial Justice Project and San Francisco Superior Court, established the [CONNECT Program](#), which allows individuals struggling with homelessness to clear their Quality of Life citations if they receive 20 hours of social services assistance. (2019)

Library Fines

Numerous jurisdictions have eliminated library fines

[Fine Free Library Map](#)

[Fine Free Library Resources and Toolkit](#)

Fees

Criminal Administrative Fees

Washtenaw County, Michigan

Implemented a [judicial administrative policy](#) to eliminate a \$60 fingerprint fee, \$1,611 in court costs, and a \$650 attorney fee for individuals who qualify for assigned counsel (2023)

Wyandotte County, Kansas

Passed an [ordinance](#) to eliminate several court costs and fees and codified an ability-to-pay docket. (2023)

Jefferson County, Alabama

Dismissed stale cases and recalled thousands of outstanding warrants going as far back as the 1980s, immediately ensuring these individuals would no longer risk arrest, fines, or fees. (2023)

Alameda County, California

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors passed an [ordinance](#) ending the assessment of county-imposed criminal administrative fees, including probation fees, public defender fees, and fees for participating in the

Sheriff's Work Alternative Program (S.W.A.P.). The ordinance also prohibited the collection of debt incurred as a result of the fees, [resulting in the waiver of \\$26 million of criminal justice debt](#). (2018)

Contra Costa County, California

The Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors passed a [resolution](#) imposing a moratorium on the assessment and collection of county-imposed adult criminal fees, including probation fees, public defender fees, and fees for alternatives to incarceration, such as electronic monitoring and work programs. (2019)

Los Angeles County, California

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors passed an [ordinance](#) eliminating "discretionary" county-imposed criminal administrative fees, including, though not limited to, fees related to [probation supervision, work furlough, misdemeanor and drug diversion programs, pretrial electronic monitoring, and public defender fees](#). The ordinance also waived related criminal fee debt. (2019)

New York City, New York

The New York City Council passed an [ordinance](#) eliminating fees of up to 8% on bail payments paid by credit card. (2019)

Buffalo, New York

The Buffalo Common Council repealed [15 vehicle and traffic fees](#) (2020)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The county amended its rules of criminal procedure to eliminate a 3% fee courts retained from posted bail payments. (2018)

Ramsey County, Minnesota

[The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners eliminated 11 fees](#), including probation supervision fees, electronic monitoring fees, and fees for diabetes supplies and over-the-counter medications for people in custody. (2020)

San Francisco City and County, California

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed an [ordinance](#) eliminating all county-imposed criminal administrative fees, including, though not limited to, probation fees, electronic monitoring fees, and booking fees, and [waived \\$33 million in related debt for 21,000 people](#). (2018)

Baltimore County, Maryland

Eliminated the [home-monitoring fees](#) charged to pre-trial and sentenced individuals. (2021)

Multnomah County, Oregon

Eliminated [probation and parole fees](#). (2020)

Seattle, Washington

Seattle Municipal Court [eliminated all discretionary fees](#) on criminal cases (2020)

Jail Fees

Miami-Dade County, Florida

Eliminated a \$2 daily subsistence fee and provided \$72 million in debt relief tied to this fee. (2022) Additionally, Miami-Dade made jail phone calls free and passed an [ordinance](#) to eliminate fees for work release, medical visits, and monitored release. (2024)

Alachua County, Florida

Eliminated a \$4 daily subsistence fee, along with all other discretionary jail fees such as medical co-pays, transportation fees to funerals and elective medical appointments as well as a uniform/linen fee (May [2023](#)). Additionally, they made jail phone calls, no more than three per day, free which were previously 21 cents per minute (April [2023](#)).

Dane County, Wisconsin

[Erased](#) nearly \$150,000 in outstanding fees accrued by people incarcerated in the county jail. Eliminated fees include bookkeeper fees, electronic monitoring fees, and medical copays

San Diego, California

[Eliminated fees](#) for phone calls and video visits (2021)

Ramsey County, Minnesota

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners amended the Ramsey County Community Corrections' Fee Schedule to eliminate all supervision, electronic home monitoring and patient healthcare fees, and certain commitment fees. (2020)

Dallas County, Texas

[The Dallas County Commissioners Court approved a 5-year contract with Securus that reduces jail phone call fees](#) from \$3.60 every 15 minutes to 18 cents per 15 minutes, eliminated fees for setting up inmate accounts, and significantly reduced third-party vendor fees. (2020)

St. Louis, Missouri

The St. Louis County Council passed an ordinance eliminating booking fees, bond fees, and several fees related to providing medical care for incarcerated individuals and waiving \$3.4 million in outstanding related debt (2019)

New York City, New York

The New York City Council passed an [ordinance](#) eliminating fees for jail phone calls. One week after the reform was implemented, [call volume at the Rikers jail complex increased by 38%](#). (2018)

Ottawa County, Michigan

[The Ottawa County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution reducing jail fees](#) from \$60/day imposed for the duration of a person's incarceration to a one-time flat fee of \$60 regardless of the duration of incarceration. (2018)

San Francisco City and County, California

San Francisco Mayor London Breed, Sheriff Vicki Hennessy, and [The San Francisco Financial Justice Project worked together to make phone calls from jail free](#) and [end all county markups or commissions on jail commissary items](#). (2020)

San Francisco implemented a completely [free tablet program in its local jails](#). Through this tablet program, every incarcerated person in the San Francisco jails has access to a tablet where every service is free. At no cost to them or their family, people can participate in educational and well-being programs, prepare for reentry by searching for job listings and housing, access important legal resources, make commissary orders and medical requests, and submit grievances. They also have free access to e-books, audiobooks, movies, and music provided through a first-of-its-kind collaboration with the San Francisco Public Library.

St. Louis County, Missouri

The St. Louis County Council [passed an ordinance](#) eliminating booking fees, bond fees, and several fees related to providing medical care for incarcerated individuals and waiving \$3.4 million in outstanding related debt. (2019)

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Eliminated [commissary surcharges](#) for individuals who are incarcerated and increased the amount of free communication from 70 minutes per week to 165 minutes per week, and added video conferencing. (2021)

Washtenaw County, Michigan

Washtenaw County Jail Sheriff forgave the [jail-related debt](#) of people incarcerated in the Washtenaw County Jail (2021).

Juvenile Administrative Fees

See [Debt-Free Justice](#) for the most up-to-date state-by-state information.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The [Philadelphia Department of Human Services ended the assessment](#) of juvenile detention fees. (2017)

Orleans Parish, Louisiana

The Orleans Parish Juvenile Court passed a [resolution](#) eliminating discretionary juvenile administrative fees, including probation supervision fees, physical and mental examination fees, care and treatment fees, appointed counsel fees, medical treatment fees, and teen or youth court program fees under informal adjustment or deferred disposition agreements. (2018)

Shelby County, Tennessee

The [Shelby County Juvenile Court ended the assessment](#) of juvenile daily detention fees and fees for court costs. (2019)

California

The State of California no longer assesses juvenile fees and has waived all associated debt.

Towing Fees

San Francisco City and County, California

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) provides [discounts](#) on tow and boot fines for people who earn below 200% of the federal poverty level (about \$62,000 for a family of four in 2024)—covering about 25% of households in San Francisco. These discounts lower the \$600+ tow fine to \$100 and provide free storage for up to 15 days for eligible individuals. Similarly, this discount lowers the nearly \$500 boot fine to \$75 for eligible individuals. (2018)

The SFMTA also provides even [deeper discounts and waivers](#) for people experiencing homelessness. (2020)

Utility Fees

Chicago, Illinois

[Mayor Lori Lightfoot developed the Utility Billing Relief Pilot Program](#), which addresses the negative impact of overdue water bills on low-income residents, particularly residents of color. Under the [program](#), participants will pay 50% less for water, sewer, and water-sewer tax bills. If participants successfully pay the discounted rate for one year, the city will waive previously incurred water utility debt. During the first year of program enrollment, the city will not shut off participants' water, charge late payment penalties or pursue debt collection. To be eligible for the program, a resident must be a homeowner and qualify for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program. Mayor Lightfoot introduced the program through her 2020 budget. The program was enacted via city council [ordinance](#). It launched in the first half of 2020. (2019)

San Francisco, California

The [San Francisco Public Utility Commission eliminated fees](#) for people who have had their water shut off. (2018)

Driver's License Suspensions

Chicago, Illinois

The Chicago City Council passed an [ordinance](#) ending the suspension of driver's licenses for the nonpayment of traffic tickets and vehicle compliance tickets. (2019)

Durham, North Carolina

The City of Durham's Innovation Team worked with the Durham District Attorney's Office and the court to waive old traffic fines and fees and helped restore 35,000 driver's licenses that had been suspended for the nonpayment of traffic tickets. (2017)

San Francisco City and County, California

[Mayor London Breed, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the San Francisco Superior Court partnered to identify and clear all outstanding holds on driver's licenses](#) for the failure to appear for a traffic court date. After working with the Superior Court to identify more than 88,000 holds that should have been cleared, FJP worked with Mayor Breed and the Superior Court to lift the DMV holds. (2019)

Washington, DC

The District of Columbia City Council passed the [Driver's License Revocation Fairness Amendment Act of 2018](#),

which eliminated the suspension of drivers' licenses for unpaid traffic debt or failure to appear at hearings. (2018)

Phoenix, Oregon

[Clears suspensions](#) and writes off all traffic debt and 10 years or older (2021).

Prosecutor-led Reforms

Prosecutors in [Shelby County, Tennessee](#); [Davidson County, Tennessee](#); [Cook County, Illinois](#); and [Suffolk County, Massachusetts](#), have stopped prosecuting charges of driving on a suspended license.

Warrants for Failure to Pay or Appear

Los Angeles, California

The Los Angeles County District Attorney and Los Angeles City Attorney partnered to void nearly 2 million citations and warrants. The City Attorney and District Attorney filed motions in the Los Angeles Superior Court to suspend fines and fees for minor pedestrian, quality-of-life, and moving violations. The City Attorney recalled and quashed nearly 150,000 warrants and moved to dismiss approximately 800,000 pending infraction citations (with 65% of those over 10 years old, and the oldest dating back to 1981). The District Attorney recalled and quashed nearly 248,000 warrants and moved to dismiss roughly 900,000 pending infraction citations (with 54% of those over 10 years old, and the oldest dating back to 1981). (2019)

4.0

Appendix B: Resource List

[2021 CCFFJ Leadership Network Impact Report](#)

[2023 CCFFJ Leadership Network Impact Report](#)

Local Policy Guide: [Ending Fees and Discharging Debt](#)

Local Policy Guide: [Making Jail Phone Calls Free and Eliminating Commissions and Kickbacks on Commissary Items](#)

[Debt Sentence: How Fines And Fees Hurt Working Families](#)

[Caution: We're Driving the Wrong Way on Automated Traffic Enforcement - Fines and Fees Justice Center](#)

Ability to Pay

[First Steps Toward More Equitable Fines and Fees Practices](#)

This resource provides evidence-based guidance for jurisdictions that currently have or are looking to implement ability to pay assessments, payment plans, and/or community service as an alternative to fines, fees, or other monetary sanctions.

[Designing Adaptable Ability-to-Pay Tools](#)

Bench Cards

Bench cards provide guidance to judges regarding the imposition and collection of court costs and fines.

[Ohio](#)

[North Carolina](#)

[National Center for State Courts](#)

Budget

FFJC's Budget Series

Episode 1: [How to Read a Budget \(Book\)](#)

Episode 2: [How to Analyze a Fiscal Note](#)

Episode 3: [Following the Money: Fine and Fee Revenue Streams](#)

Episode 4: [Follow the Money: Finding Fines and Fees Revenue Streams](#)

Vera Institute: [How to Use Budgets to Understand Criminal Justice Fines and Fees](#)

Cities & Counties for Fine and Fee Justice is a joint initiative of Results for America, The San Francisco Financial Justice Project, and the Fines and Fees Justice Center.

The San Francisco Financial Justice Project (FJP) is the nation's first effort embedded in government to assess and reform fines, fees, and financial penalties that disproportionately impact low-income residents and communities of color. Working with community organizations, advocates, city and county departments, and courts, FJP has spearheaded the elimination or reduction of dozens of fines and fees and lifted millions of dollars in debt off of tens of thousands of local residents. FJP's accomplishments are listed [here](#), and [here](#) is a guide to available fine and fee discounts for San Francisco low-income residents.

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) seeks to catalyze a movement to eliminate the fines and fees that distort justice. FFJC's goal is to eliminate fees in the justice system and to ensure that fines are equitably imposed and enforced. FFJC provides resources, makes critical connections, offers strategic advice, and serves as a hub for the fines and fees reform movement, working with impacted communities, researchers, advocates, legislators, justice system stakeholders, and media all across America.

Results for America helps decision-makers at all levels of government harness the power of evidence and data to solve our world's greatest challenges. Their mission is to make investing in what works the "new normal," so that when policymakers make decisions, they start by seeking the best evidence and data available, and then use what they find to get better results.

