

Fact Sheet:

Unpacking The Latest Fines and Fees Trends Across Georgia

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Introduction

Fines and fees are significant revenue sources for many localities in Georgia. However, when more than 10% of a locality's revenue derives from these sources, it often indicates an abusive reliance that can disproportionately impact low-income communities and people of color. This fact sheet examines the latest trends in fines and fees across Georgia, highlighting the economic and social implications of these practices.

In 2022, 86 localities in Georgia (which include cities and counties) relied heavily on court fines and fees, with at least 10% of their total revenue coming from these sources.¹ The funds collected were used to support police, courts, jails and other city and county services. Paying a fine or fee may inconvenience some Georgians, but for those living below the poverty line, it can be economically devastating. Data show that localities with high reliance on fines and fees often have high concentrations of people experiencing poverty and people of color. Even minor traffic offenses can result in mounting court debts and criminalization for Georgians unable to pay these fees upfront, further harming low-income communities of color.

This fact sheet includes local revenue data from the Georgia Department of Community Affairs and population and poverty data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey. It aims to uncover the patterns of abusive fines and fees practices, demonstrating the impacts on people living in poverty, including their vulnerability to exploitative and regressive financial policies. These data offer a resource for lawmakers to consider the implications of regressive fines and fees policies, future proposals to expand fine and fee reliance, and the need for safeguards to protect Georgians earning low incomes from deeper poverty, economic immobility and criminalization.



Fine: A financial penalty levied by the criminal legal system to deter or punish someone, in response to a conviction or violation.



Fee: A financial charge levied on top of a fine, with the intent to raise revenue and shift the costs of local and state government onto those who come into contact with the criminal legal system.

Explore the Data in our
Interactive Dashboard



<https://gbpi.org/FinesFeesDashboard>

Latest Highlights from 2022

- **Abusive Fine and Fee Practices:** 86 Georgia localities relied on high and abusive fines and fees for at least 10% of their local budgets.
- **Poverty Correlation:** 64 of these localities had poverty rates that were higher than the state average of 13%.
- **Severe Poverty Rates:** Nearly three quarters of these 64 localities had poverty rates that were at least five percentage points above the state average.
- **Racial Disparities:** 23 localities had Black populations above the state average of 31%, and fines and fees reliance at or above 20%, mirroring thresholds identified by the US Department of Justice in Ferguson, Missouri.²
- **Extreme Reliance:** Among the 12 localities relying on fines and fees for at least 40% of their budgets, 9 had above-average poverty rates, and 4 had Black populations surpassing the state average.³
- **Revenue Disproportion:** Nearly half (44%) of the reported fine and fee revenue in 2022 was generated in communities with higher-than-average Black populations and an overall poverty rate (28%) more than double the state average.

Long-term Fine and Fee Trends (2016-2022)

- The number of municipalities with high and abusive reliance on fines and fees decreased from 98 to 77, a 27% decline. The number of counties (9) meeting the high and abusive fines and fees reliance threshold remained unchanged.
- Municipalities with higher-than-average poverty and Black populations consistently generated a disproportionate share of statewide fine and fee revenue, accounting for 51% in 2016 and 44% in 2022, despite only comprising 29% and 26% of all municipalities, respectively.

Policy Recommendations

- Avoid Regressive Revenue Policies that unfairly burden individuals in contact with the justice system, such as adding technology fees that are imposed on Georgians regardless of their sentence, offense or circumstances of their case.
- Implement Proactive Revenue Policies, like the Earned Income Tax Credit, to support the economic mobility of Georgians earning low wages.
- Expand Sales Tax Application to boost state and local revenue, reducing reliance on regressive revenue sources, like fines and fees, to balance budgets.

This data highlights the harm of local fines and fees practices that contribute to poverty and criminalization. Policies that increase monetary enforcement and squeeze local governments to rely on fines and fees will only worsen the existing inequities that prevent all Georgians from having opportunities to thrive. GBPI is committed to making fines and fees data more publicly available as a helpful tool to providing lawmakers and advocates with insights for meaningful and equitable solutions.

Endnotes

¹Maciag, M. (2019, August 19). Addicted to fines. Governing. <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-addicted-to-fines.html>

²United State Department of Justice Civil Rights Division. (2015, March 4). Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf.

³Among the 12 localities that relied on fines and fees to cover more than 40 percent of their budget, some had higher than average poverty rates, but not higher than average Black populations, and vice versa.