

# Introduction

Monetary sanctions, also known as legal financial obligations, are state-imposed fines and fees associated with court involvement. These are the financial aspects of the criminal justice system serving variously as punishment for defendants and revenue generation for court jurisdictions. In terms of both frequency and breadth, the rise of court-based fines and fees is largely invisible to most people but has far-reaching—and long-lasting—effects for court-involved individuals and their kin. The authors contributing to this issue of *Focus on Poverty* draw on a growing body of scholarship to explore and explain some of the many nuances of monetary sanctions and their effects.

We start with Joshua Page and Joe Soss presenting their view on criminal legal systems as mechanisms for racialized resource extraction. Standard practices in court systems throughout the United States act to routinely extract resources from low-income and communities of color in order to generate revenue for local governments and affiliated private interests.

The next two articles both draw from a comprehensive examination of monetary sanctions featured in an edition of *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, published in January 2022. The research of Alexes Harris—e.g., *A Pound of Flesh: Monetary Sanctions as Punishment for the Poor* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2016)—has been a catalyst for much of this work. Both Kirk et al. and Boches et al. draw on data procured through the Harris-led Multi-State Study of Monetary Sanctions project (see [www.monetarysanctions.org](http://www.monetarysanctions.org)).

Gabriela Kirk, Kristina Thompson, Beth Huebner, Christopher Uggen, and Sarah Shannon explore the construct of acquaintanceship density in rural court systems. They use ethnographic data drawn from interviews of court personnel and courtroom observations in Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, and Missouri. Similarly, Daniel Boches and co-authors Brittany Martin, Andrea Giuffre, Amairini Sanches, Aubrienne Sutherland, and Sarah Shannon examine the extensive impacts—called symbiotic harms—of legal fines and fees on friends and family of system-involved individuals.

Rebecca Goldstein, Helen Ho, and Bruce Western continue the collaborative work started with their late colleague Devah Pager by looking at how court fees criminalize low-income defendants when they are unable to pay. The study profiled here is particularly strong in its assertions about causal relationships due to the nature of its experimental design, a randomized controlled trial.

Two “Research to Watch” items are also included in this issue. Joshua Page and Joe Soss highlight their upcoming book, *Preying on the Poor: Criminal Justice as Revenue Racket*, as an examination of predatory governance in the United States and various forms of resistance emerging from low-income communities. Daniel Boches and colleagues, Timothy Edgemon and Brittany Martin, also provide a prelude to their anticipated work regarding the stressors of legal debt and how it intersects with, and amplifies, racial health disparities.

Thank you for reading *Focus on Poverty*. Please send any questions or comments to IRP Director of Communications Judith Siers-Poisson at [sierspoisson@wisc.edu](mailto:sierspoisson@wisc.edu). A note to educators: If you use *Focus on Poverty* in the classroom, we would especially love to hear from you!