

“Social Media as Witness: Online Forum Narratives on the Criminalization of Poverty in the U.S.”

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explores the phenomenon of poverty-driven criminalization in the United States through the lens of social media narratives, seeking to understand more deeply both the causes and impacts of a criminal system which punishes the poor. Here, I systematically analyze posts from social media platform Reddit and fundraising platform GoFundMe, where individuals share personal stories and experiences within the criminal legal system, seeking advice and support. This research seeks to illuminate the varied impacts of laws and policies that disproportionately target and penalize impoverished communities, further entrenching them in cycles of poverty and legal entanglements. The methodology of this study involved a systematic collection and thematic analysis of social media posts, focusing on the broad themes of cash bail, fines and fees, public defender accessibility, and homelessness. These narratives all provide unique insights into the lived experiences of those affected by poverty-driven criminalization, revealing not only the financial but also the emotional and societal toll of such systemic injustices. “Social Media as Witness” aims to contribute to the broader discourse on social justice and legal reform by highlighting the personal, real-world impacts of punitive legal measures. Here, this work underscores the need for policy changes which address the root causes of poverty and criminalization, rather than merely its symptoms. This study not only amplifies the voices of those directly impacted by this system, but also supports future advocacy efforts by providing nuanced perspectives that are often overlooked in traditional legal and policy analyses.

Introduction

The criminalization of poverty in the United States is a complex and pervasive phenomenon with profound implications for marginalized individuals and their communities. This work seeks to explore the lived experiences and narratives of individuals affected by poverty-driven criminalization, focusing on understanding the impact of policies and laws which make it nearly impossible for those in poverty to escape the criminal legal system after a first encounter with it. Rather than relying on quantitative data sources such as arrest and warrant records, which proved prohibitively difficult to obtain, this research adopts a qualitative approach by analyzing social media (Reddit and GoFundMe) posts from across the country to capture the diverse perspectives and voices of those who may be impacted by this phenomenon. While GoFundMe is not a typical social media platform, the website is a useful forum for people in need to raise money for a variety of struggles, including legal fines and fees, making it a great fit for the collection of data. The criminalization of poverty, deeply intertwined with the realms of law, social justice, and incarceration, demands nuanced exploration nationally and locally, and I hope to supplement this burgeoning area of study with detailed documentation of peoples' firsthand experiences with these systems in this research. At its core, the criminalization of poverty refers to the disproportionate targeting and punishment of individuals living in poverty by the criminal legal system, a process which in turn perpetuates cycles of mass incarceration and economic/social inequality.

Central to understanding this criminalization are various factors which exacerbate the challenges faced by impoverished individuals within the legal system. One key aspect of the national fight against these systems is the pervasive use of egregious fines and fees on criminal defendants, which disproportionately burden low-income individuals and perpetuate cycles of debt and incarceration. Regularly, Americans in every state in the nation are arrested or fined for being *unable to pay* a fine. These fines and fees encompass a wide range of charges, some for punishment and some for court operations, including case fees, court fees, and processing/booking-related fees, each contributing to the financial strain on individuals already struggling to make ends meet. It has been well documented by journalists and scholars alike that municipalities extract these fines and fees from their poorest citizens largely because of the political infeasibility of raising local taxes and the ease of making up the difference through the criminal system.¹ This creates a perverse incentive structure for the city or local government to make up their lost revenue through tickets, fines, and fees.

Of particular interest is the “pay-to-stay” system adopted by many localities to pay for the costs of caging individuals in the city jail. In many jurisdictions, detainees are charged a fee for each day they’re housed in jail. While being held, these individuals are often unable to maintain their responsibilities related to work, housing, or even custody of their children, leading to lifelong consequences due to an inability to bond out.

In that same vein, the imposition of cash bail further entrenches the cycle of poverty within the US criminal legal system, particularly when one considers that the States are one of two nations

¹Edelman, Peter, “*Not a Crime to be Poor: The Criminalization of Poverty in America*,” New York: The New York Press, 2017.

“End Fees, Discharge Debt, Fairly Fund Government,” from *The Fines and Fees Justice Center*, 2022.

in the world who have refused to abolish cash bail– the other being The Philippines.² On top of the *per diem* pay-to-stay fee mentioned above, individuals detained in jail can be held for months or even years waiting for trial, simply due to an inability to pay bail or receive a loan from a bail bondsman. Because they cannot afford to buy their freedom, this structure creates an incentive system for defendants to plead guilty to crimes they never committed and be released on time served, rather than fight for their innocence and lose their entire livelihoods in the process. If someone, for example, were to plead guilty with time served after three months in jail, they would be released with a stain on their record that will limit opportunities for housing, employment, and more for the rest of their lives. However, that is oftentimes the best of two bad options. When a defendant is waiting for trial and unable to post bail, they experience serious collateral consequences pertaining to housing, employment, and more. Moreover, police discrimination and overreach against visible poverty and other minority groups exacerbates the criminalization of poverty, with marginalized communities disproportionately targeted for enforcement actions.

Another key facet of this issue is the criminalization of homelessness, particularly pronounced in urban centers with high costs of living and low housing supply.³ Homeless individuals face heightened scrutiny and enforcement measures, effectively “othered” from the rest of society. Laws targeting activities such as sleeping in public spaces, urinating or defecating in public (when there is often no available public restroom), and panhandling further marginalize and criminalize poverty. Further, due to extreme social stigmas against homeless communities and

²American Civil Liberties Union of Pennsylvania, “Smart Justice: Ending Cash Bail,” <https://www.aclupa.org/en/smart-justice-ending-cash-bail>.

³Zillow Research, “Connections Between Homelessness and Rent Affordability,” Last modified March 5, 2019, <https://www.zillow.com/research/homelessness-rent-affordability-22247/>.

their heightened vulnerability to substance use disorder or visible mental health episodes, police overreach on impoverished people living in public spaces can be even more severe.

In engaging in data collection, I also found significant evidence of the impact that the cultures created within these respective Internet communities. In subreddits such as r/legaladvice, which is populated with attorneys and individuals who skew towards a less-forgiving perspective of people involved in the criminal system, posters tend to focus their narratives on the specific questions and legal statutes they have. On the other hand, in communities like r/homelessness, where members are more open and receptive to personal stories/experiences, posters were much more likely to divulge information that could, in other circumstances, negatively stigmatize audiences against providing advice, indicating a more supportive and open culture within the community.

Here, I hope to examine some of the many multifaceted challenges people face within the criminal legal system, and, in doing so, engage in a comprehensive exploration of these individuals' experiences with the criminalization of poverty, and poverty worsened as a result of criminalization. Through the following literature review encompassing national perspectives, legal analyses, local insights, and other similar studies or methodologies, I'll provide a backdrop for my research on peoples' experiences as shared through social media posts. This research aims to shed light on the drivers of systemic poverty-driven criminalization in the legal system and to explore commonalities and differences across different individuals' experiences.

Literature Review

The criminalization of poverty unfolds as a pervasive and complex phenomenon, and it reverberates across social media platforms where thousands of users recount their lived experiences within the criminal justice system. Through qualitative analysis of Reddit posts, this research embarks on a journey to illuminate the voices and narratives of those ensnared by poverty-driven criminalization. Situated within the digital landscape, this literature review endeavors to synthesize the diverse array of perspectives existing among researchers who have studied the criminalization of poverty and the communities created on social media. By examining this prior work, I'll be better able to situate the personal testimonies explored in my research and better uncover the systemic injustices perpetrated within the criminal legal system. Through the lens of social media discourse and social, legal, and political research, this review offers an opening for my work: to better amplify and examine the voices of people impacted by the legal system who seek out support in these online communities.

General Information- The Criminalization of Poverty

Peter B. Edelman's work serves as a foundational cornerstone for understanding the national landscape of the criminalization of poverty. In "Criminalization of Poverty: Much More to Do," Edelman dissects the historical roots of this criminalization and systemic issues disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. He identifies broad categories of criminalization which were taken into account when conducting this research, including administration of fines and fees, cash bail, and indigent defense. He provides an overview of further topics concerning chronic nuisance orders, mental health episodes, and other minor elements of the legal system which have a massive impact on peoples' lives.

The American Bar Association's Public Defense Summit, held in Chicago in 2021, delves into critical challenges faced by public defenders nationwide, shedding light on key issues in indigent defense and, by extension, the criminalization of poverty. The summit's insights, spanning fines and fees, the absence of counsel, bail reform, and the criminalization of homelessness, provide a comprehensive understanding of the most pressing legal issues facing impoverished people. The ABA's national analysis also allows for the identification of shared concerns that resonate within the Reddit and GoFundMe posts analyzed in this study.

Dewan's 2015 *New York Times* article, titled "The Collateral Consequences of Criminal Justice," explores often overlooked extraneous consequences associated with the criminal legal system, as well as the fact that these consequences often affect the most vulnerable members of society. The piece includes first-person narratives of individuals impacted by this system who struggle to gain stability post-release. It serves as an example of the effect that personal testimonies on the system can have on public discourse and provided inspiration for the qualitative analysis of forum posts here.

Fines, Fees, and Their Legal Implications

Beth Colgan's legal 2018 legal analysis published in the *Economics and Law Journal* provides a comprehensive explanation of the intricate legal issues surrounding fines, fees, and forfeitures, all issues which disproportionately impact people in poverty. Her analysis identifies the connection between the disproportionate administration of fines and fees and the political inability in many localities for civil representatives to raise taxes. With a need for more revenue

and nowhere to get it, the criminal systems' fines and fees are raised to extravagant levels throughout the United States.

Edelman's book, "Not a Crime to be Poor: The Criminalization of Poverty in America," promises a deeper understanding of fines and fees, chronic nuisance orders, and the broader intersections of race, poverty, and the criminal legal system. His multidimensional exploration includes discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline and an emphasis on the courts' roles in fueling mass incarceration and perpetuating cycles of poverty. His work helps to position forum posts within the broader narrative of the criminalization of poverty in the legal system.

Edelman's article, "The Criminalization of Poverty and the People Who Fight Back," published in the Georgetown Journal on Poverty Law and Policy in 2018, focuses on the unjust system of fines and fees, cash bail, and systemic discrimination against impoverished individuals in legal and health systems. His exploration of historical context and the efforts of movement lawyers and activists to challenge these systems adds depth to understanding the resistance of the public against the criminalization of poverty, and legal strategies to combat it.

The report "End Fees, Discharge Debt, Fairly Fund Government," (2022) from the Fines and Fees Justice Center emerges as a crucial advocacy perspective and prescription of solutions to the system of fines and fees. This organization plays a role in organizing state and local efforts against exploitation through fines and fees, and in this report provides a comprehensive exploration of their history, types, and the imperative to discharge debt and eliminate this exploitative system. They shed light on the unsettling dynamics of the system, where the success

in raising administrative assessment fees paradoxically depends on the failure to prevent crime, illustrating a disconcerting incentive structure within the criminal legal system. With a minimum of 30 billion dollars in debt from the criminal system, the report delves into examples showcasing how the cost of administration and collection of fees can lead to less overall revenue for localities due to both administrative expenses and peoples' inability to pay. Integrating this report enriches my research by connecting the qualitative analysis to the real-world causes and consequences of these experiences.

Personal Narratives and Social Media Insights

Tony Messenger's book, "Profit and Punishment: How America Criminalizes the Poor in the Name of Justice" offers vivid personal narratives that bring to light the harsh realities of modern debtor's prisons. By sharing the story of Kendy Killman, who has struggled under the burden of exorbitant fees for a decade stemming from a single traffic stop, Messenger humanizes the statistics and provides a compelling look into the lives of those directly affected by the criminalization of poverty. This narrative approach complements the Reddit testimonies analyzed in this study, highlighting the personal impact of these systemic issues in a resonant way.

"A Content Analysis of Juul Discussions on Social Media" and "Reddit Users' Experiences of Suicidal Thoughts During the COVID-19 Pandemic" both employ methodologies that reveal the power of social media platforms to capture and disseminate user experiences and perceptions. These studies illustrate how Reddit serves not only as a medium for sharing personal experiences but also as a space for community support and discussion on critical health and social issues.

This aligns with my research focus on Reddit as a platform where users can articulate their encounters with the legal system and the criminalization of poverty.

“Studying Reddit: A Systematic Overview of Disciplines, Approaches, Methods, and Ethics” by Nicholas Proferes, et al. provides a helpful meta-analysis of how Reddit has been used as a data source across various fields. They highlight the growing reliance on Reddit for academic research, new or unique ethical considerations involved, and the impact of Reddit’s algorithms on data collection. Insights from this paper help in understanding the methodological and ethical landscape of using social media data in my analysis of criminalization on Reddit and GoFundMe.

Crowdfunding and Financial Assistance Online

“A Qualitative Analysis of Requests for Financial Help via GoFundMe by Victims of Intimate Partner Violence” and “Bridging Social Capital through the Techno-Subsystem: A Qualitative Analysis of GoFundMe Requests for Hurricane Relief” both delve into the dynamics of crowdfunding on GoFundMe. These studies provide perspectives on how individuals use online platforms to seek financial help and community support in times of personal and collective crisis. Crucially, they explore how narratives of need are often framed and the social factors which influence these portrayals, which parallel the dynamics observed in the posts about legal financial burdens analyzed here.

Legal Reforms and Advocacy

Lastly, “Death of a Bail Bondsman” and “A Moral and Legal Imperative to Act: The Bail Bond Industry, Consumer Protection, and Public Enforcers” focus on the legal frameworks of and advocacy against the bail bond system. These sources provide a critical overview of the legal challenges and potential for reform within the bail system in the US, offering a deeper understanding of the legal arguments against practices that disproportionately impact impoverished populations. The insight from these studies is crucial for framing the discussion on legal issues identified in these social media narratives.

Purpose

This research contributes to the existing literature discussed above by providing a more nuanced analysis of poverty-driven criminalization through the qualitative analysis of Reddit and a small selection of GoFundMe forum posts. By centering the voices and experiences of individuals affected by poverty-related legal issues, this research offers unique insights into the real human impact of punitive legal measures and systemic inequalities. The integration of prior research explaining systemic drivers with these personal narratives enriches our collective understanding of the complex dynamics shaping the criminal system and its impacts on real people. Through identifying common threads among these individual experiences, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the criminal legal system’s failures, amplify the voices of those most impacted, and support future advocacy efforts by providing greater nuance among the landscape of this issue.

Methodology

To conduct this research, my methodology entailed the systematic collection and analysis of social media (Reddit and GoFundMe) posts and their comments to delve into individuals' firsthand experiences with poverty-driven criminalization. Using keyword searches within specific popular subreddits and selection criteria, I identified pertinent posts that elucidate personal narratives, challenges, and systemic issues pertaining to poverty and legal entanglements. I specifically sought out posts relevant to this discourse, and made note of persistent themes and tones across the communities I explored. While the sheer breadth of online discourse precludes any exhaustive analysis, the ambition was to generate a picture that captures commonalities and variations across posters' experiences to provide a nuanced portrayal of the legal system's impact, big and small. To analyze the collected data, I employed qualitative techniques, primarily thematic and tonal analysis, to see how people interpreted their experiences, and how they sought out support in online communities.

Data Collection

My approach involved categorizing social media posts among 4 key thematic categories, which I decided upon due to prior researchers' emphasis on these systemic drivers of poverty-driven criminalization: cash bail, fines and fees (including Failure to Pay Warrants and the "pay-to-stay" jail system), indigent defense accessibility and quality, and homelessness.

Data collection primarily revolved around Reddit, a popular online social networking forum where individuals share their experiences and seek advice on a litany of topics, including legal issues. Findings were stored in a [spreadsheet](#) and analyzed concurrently with data collection to

maintain accuracy in interpretation. About 50-75 posts per topic were collected, focusing on the top or most popular posts in the subreddits and keywords searched.

Variables for my keyword searches on Reddit include keywords related to poverty, criminalization, legal entanglements, and personal narratives. The selection criteria focus on identifying posts that provide insights into individuals' experiences with poverty-driven criminalization, including interactions with the criminal legal system, challenges accessing legal and other resources, and systemic barriers to economic stability.

Data Analysis

The collected posts underwent a rigorous thematic analysis process to identify common themes, patterns, and narratives across the dataset to reveal insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating the criminal justice system. I sought to categorize the most relevant or similar posts which described common occurrences, as well as identify unique stories which were particularly compelling examples of the policy impacts in question in this research.

Discussion

In the spreadsheet linked above exist my findings, saved with the full text of each post, what was searched to find the post, and when the post was found, as well as created. I've documented the full breakdown of these posts because, while my analysis will delve deeply into the experiences described within them, the full text is of course rich with even more opportunities for analysis. In

my discussion below, I hope to paint as full a picture as possible of what people are experiencing in the criminal legal system when it comes to the four categories I've examined.

Clearly, most of the crimes or legal experiences people are sharing on Reddit are lower level, usually misdemeanors or lesser felonies, due to the open and public nature of the platform. These narratives truly demonstrate the impact that seemingly small charges and legal issues can have on individuals, especially those financially struggling. In just one bad night, it's possible for someone to lose everything, or at least have it all on the line.

Cash Bail

I've collected and analyzed many posts reporting peoples' experiences with cash bail, finding common threads throughout these experiences. By far the most common experience people ask for help with is being abandoned by a bail bondsman or otherwise scammed in the process of posting bail for a loved one. Another common experience are relatives or friends expressing the fear that co-signing for their loved ones created, or the struggles they've endured as an innocent person because their loved one skipped out on bail. I've also found that people are, by and large, confused with the process of the court system and pre-trial detention, and seek out resources less intimidating than those presented in the courthouse or by a lawyer by turning to social media. Some posts are from the perspective of the person charged, while some are told from the perspective of a friend or family member, but nearly all express some worry about being able to pay the bail, seeking out a predatory loan, and making sure the person incarcerated is safe and eventually free.

Reddit Posts

By far, the most common experience reported by community members of r/legaladvice when discussing the cash bail system is an incredible struggle in paying the price of their or a loved one's freedom. Eleven of the identified posts went into great detail about the circumstances under which they were struggling to afford bail, and their narratives were exceedingly common for those caught up in the criminal system: their mother was incarcerated on drug charges, or they are in-between jobs, or struggling in an abusive relationship dynamic. The countless externalities of impact which result simply from being unable to pay bail are shocking, and reflect a pattern of cyclical poverty and violence within the US legal apparatus. In some cases, posters reported that, despite their bail being too low for a bail bondsman to bother issuing a loan, it was far more than they could afford, as a family living on the edge of homelessness.

Another incredibly common experience— amounting to nine detailed posts— is the entanglement of family members or friends due to the nature of cash bail. One user reflected a common experience, where a lack of a permanent address— he and his wife were living in a hotel— and a lack of familial resources led to him asking a friend to take on a massive risk: allow him to put their address on the legal form and ask the friend to cosign on his loan from a bail bondsman. This common experience can end in one of two ways: the defendant can appear at each court date and adhere to all of the requirements of their bail, or that family friend will be on the hook for a massive loan from a predatory bondsman— ranging anywhere from \$30,000 to \$250,000 in the posts I've collected. The cash bail system forces legally innocent people to put their livelihoods on the line if they want to do a good deed for a loved one, and leads to incredibly heated debates in the forums of r/legaladvice when a situation like this should arise.

On the topic of bail bondsmen, many users also came to the forum seeking advice as victims of scams by these predatory lenders. In repeated cases, despite the case being resolved by a not guilty verdict, users reported struggling to recoup the funds they were due from posting bail. In two separate cases analyzed, the users reported that they would be proceeding with legal action against the bondsmen due to the years-long battles they had respectively had with the lenders.

The issues created by the cash bail system are further compounded by the sheer lack of communication and education on the legal processes these defendants are entrenched in. Countless users, defendants and their family members, made posts indicating extreme confusion and bewilderment at some of the more simple aspects of the legal process, including the difference between bail and bond, what various warrants/charges mean, and how court fine payment works. These posts all reflect a lack of effective and comprehensive communication by attorneys and the court system to enable those charged to make the best decisions for themselves and their loved ones. When the courts fall through and Google isn't clear enough, we see these users reaching out to Internet forums for pseudo-expert clarification.

Another experience which reflects the cyclical nature of the criminal system when it comes to poverty/inability to pay is clearly seen in five detailed narratives. In these posts, the respective users come from all across the country, and each of them were unable to afford their bail, court fines, or fees. Upon being unable to pay these fees, instead of their inability to pay being taken into account by the court, each were issued what is known as a Failure to Pay (FTP) warrant for their arrest, which, following the jail period, would inevitably result in even more fines and fees. This is a common and illogical response to poverty within the criminal system. If someone is

unable to pay a fine, it in no way increases their likelihood of payment by incarcerating them and preventing them from maintaining steady employment.

A final category of bail-related post that stuck out were those detailing intra-family or relationship disputes which had led to an expensive, arduous, and traumatizing legal case, despite neither party wanting to press charges or take the legal battle further. In these cases, once the police are called or involved, the charges are up to the state, no matter the non-criminal solution that may be available and more suitable to both victim and offender.

Other common occurrences within the subreddit include: situations wherein someone posted bond for an abusive partner, putting them into severe debt despite signing the bond under duress; small traffic infractions or driving with a suspended license leading to warrants for failure to pay fines, and, because of the nature of the Internet, some posts which seem to be fake or, at the very least, exaggerated. The fact that anyone can create a post under a “throwaway” username on these forums is vital to keep in mind, but luckily the outlandish and obviously fake stories are relatively easy to spot. One which I identified was a story where a user claimed he had been charged with a DUI and was being “railroaded” by the criminal system despite blowing 0.000 BAC on a breathalyzer on the night in question. A quick search of the account showed me that he had posted similarly outrageous stories on a variety of subreddits, some of which even contradicted one another in terms of his identity and experiences. With a bit of Internet sleuthing, the validity of my research was improved greatly by eliminating potentially false/exaggerated stories like these.

During the course of my research, several notable stories emerged from the Reddit posts, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges experienced by those subject to the cash bail system. While these stories by no means represent the majority of experiences shared on these forums, their detailed narratives and specific circumstances contribute to a far deeper understanding of the unexpected harms and externalities stemming from our current bail practices.

One such post highlighted the predicament of an individual who had the financial means to secure their release and post bail, but lacked the familial or social support to do so. Having no one to bail them out led to them being stranded in jail, despite having the financial resources to pay for their release. This individual underscores the importance of social networks in navigating the bail system, and the stark consequences when your situation cannot meld perfectly with the established rules.

Another poignant account involved a young man with a difficult and abusive upbringing, whose incarceration followed an altercation with his father over the alleged theft of his truck. Unable to afford bail, this individual faced not only the confinement of jail and a nonexistent support system, but also the agony of a tooth infection without access to dental care. Because of his poverty, his dental condition would remain untreated, an ever-present reminder of the healthcare disparities within the criminal system.

In a separate story, a mother sought advice to aid her son, demonstrating a complex interplay of parental concern, acknowledgement of accountability, and shame at seeking help. She was desperately unfamiliar with the intricacies of the criminal legal system, and her post indicates that she expected an overwhelmingly negative response from the law community on Reddit.

The narratives also highlighted instances of misunderstanding and coercion, such as a mother facing harassment for bail obligations she unwittingly signed onto for an abusive partner years ago. A vulnerable individual, she was coerced into a legal agreement and endured the financial repercussions for years, despite leaving her abuser and changing her life for the better. Her story reflects a system which unwittingly punished a woman for finally having the courage to leave a manipulative, violent relationship— a story which is all too common in today’s legal landscape. Additionally, accounts of individuals with disabilities, caretaking responsibilities, or mental illness underscores the disproportionate impact of the cash bail system on marginalized communities. From disabled mothers unable to access their benefits to caretakers facing incarceration, these stories demonstrate the external harms and systemic injustices inherent in our current cash bail system.

Further notable stories include:

1. An individual facing felony evasion charges expressing concern for their elderly grandmother’s welfare if they were to face jail time.
2. A teacher seeking resources to support a student from an abusive and impoverished background facing familial assault charges.
3. Instances where missed court appearances due to employment obligations resulted in arrest warrants, highlighting the punitive nature of the legal system towards those who can’t afford to miss work or other obligations.
4. Loved ones with serious mental illnesses, primarily schizophrenia, incarcerated without proper legal recourse or medical support for their conditions, reflecting the failures of the criminal system to adequately address mental health needs.

Again, while not exhaustive, these notable stories serve as reminders of the human toll of poverty-driven criminalization and the urgent need for change within the cash bail system.

GoFundMe

In examining GoFundMe campaigns related to cash bail, a poignant reflection of the desperation and users' need for community reliance becomes evident. These posts not only highlight individual predicaments but also the broader societal implications of the cash bail system, with common themes emerging reflecting a blend of personal hardship, appeals for empathy, and the societal backdrop which necessitates such campaigns.

Many GoFundMe posts are driven by immediate or unexpected financial desperation, where people or their families are unable to bear the financial burden imposed by the cash bail system. For example, one campaign states: *“Despite my sincere intentions and adherence to the law, I was arrested and a judge has deemed it necessary to press charges citing malicious intent. I am now facing bail expenses that I simply cannot afford on my own.”* These stories frequently underscore the incredibly thin line between seemingly minor legal issues and major life disruptions, particularly for those living in poverty or near its brink.

Meanwhile, the responses to these campaigns often reflect a community's willingness to support those caught in the punitive cycle of the cash bail system. Donations, even in small amounts, accumulate from broad networks of online supporters, demonstrating a form of collective action against the systemic issues represented by each poster's story. This aspect of aggregating social

capital is crucial, highlighting how online platforms serve not just as a last resort for fundraising but as a space for communal solidarity.

Frequently, posters on GoFundMe's narratives would reflect deeper, systemic issues, including the lack of adequate legal representation, especially for impoverished people, the complexities and confusions surrounding bail bonds processes, and the emotional and psychological toll of the criminal justice system on individuals and their families. One poignant narrative explains:

“Tommy was arrested this morning... He had a car accident and when police arrived, he was arrested for possession. He is in jail in Tyler, Texas, and there is a \$20,000 bail set. That usually means \$2,000 cash to get him out.”

The crowdfunding efforts also reveal legal and ethical challenges within the modern day criminal system, questioning not only the fairness of the cash bail system but also reflecting on the broader implications of relying on community funding to secure one's freedom. Such campaigns challenge the notion of justice in the criminal system, illustrating how poverty can lead to an entirely different reality for a defendant navigating legal challenges. One user lamented: *“My best friend and the father of our beautiful 8-year-old daughter... was recently incarcerated for a non-violent and non-drug related crime... His bond is only \$2,500. I cannot go one more day knowing that he is all alone, barely holding onto life with no one that he loves or that loves him beside him.”*

Just as with the Reddit discussions, the narratives on GoFundMe offer a rich tapestry of personal experiences that are emblematic of larger systemic failures. Both platforms showcase the

individual and communal impacts of the cash bail system, but GoFundMe adds a unique dimension by directly engaging with the financial aspects of criminalization and showcasing real-time community responses to these crises.

Fines and Fees

The analysis of posts from platforms like r/legaladvice reveals a myriad of challenges people face concerning excessive fines and fees within the criminal legal system. From traffic violations to probation-related fees, the burden of financial obligations often exacerbates existing economic hardships, perpetuating cycles of poverty and legal entanglements.

Within the subreddit, upon searching for key terms related to fines and fees, several common themes emerge, reflecting the systemic issues inherent in the imposition and enforcement of fines and fees. Among the notable posts were instances of individuals grappling with the inability to pay court fines, fearing arrest warrants or further financial penalties. The precarious situation of seeking loans to settle court fees, only to accumulate more debt, serves to elucidate the desperate measures people are willing to resort to to avoid being arrested due to a failure to pay (FTP). License suspension due to unpaid fines emerges as a recurring theme, with people facing the dilemma of needing a license to work and pay off debts, but being unable to afford the fines necessary for license reinstatement. Outside of a general inability to pay fines and fees, license suspensions were the most common experience reported by community members in the subreddit, with many posters expressing indignation at a paradoxical situation which seems designed to reintroduce them to the criminal system, instead of helping them get out of it.

Additionally, exceedingly common were stories of individuals caught in a recurring cycle of late payments, missed deadlines, and subsequently escalating penalties. Despite being unable to pay and paying late/making no payments as a result, these individuals are hit with repeated late fines, fees, and sometimes even interest, making it difficult to impossible to pay off their debts. This system of cyclically escalating penalties highlights the punitive nature of the current system, one which disproportionately impacts those already struggling to make ends meet.

A broader search across multiple subreddits, outside of r/legaladvice, revealed similar narratives, with individuals facing arrest warrants and license suspensions due to unpaid fines, often stemming from traffic violations or missed court appearances. The intersectionality of personal crises, such as homelessness, unemployment, or health issues, further compounded countless posters' challenges in meeting financial obligations to the court, and, in many circumstances, resulted in the state issuing a warrant for their arrest.

Whether individuals were unable to appear in court due to employment or family obligations or were unable to pay their fines or make sufficient payments, they were all subject to the same punishment: arrest warrants. Countless posts throughout Reddit were collected with people sharing their experiences with Failure to Appear (FTA) and Failure to Pay (FTP) warrants.

Other common threads throughout the forums included: people who believe they have paid off the entirety of their fines/ticket, but suddenly receive a FTP warrant or notice to appear and individuals who weren't sure if they would legally be allowed to drive again, despite meeting the conditions to restore their license. These stories reflect the slow, bureaucratic process of the legal

system and the previously-discussed insufficient communication to defendants undergoing said process. Another common post included individuals who were *absolutely certain* that their unique circumstances would compel the judge to dispel their fees, because they weren't a "typical criminal," reflecting the separation that those outside of the criminal justice system project onto those entangled within it.

Again, several notable stories identified in the process of my data collection help shed light on the depth of the human toll of fines and fees within the criminal justice system:

1. One individual, placed on probation as a diversionary alternative to jail time, faces mounting court fines and increasing, daily, probation fees. He expressed sheer indignance at the legality of these practices, saying he felt set up to fail among these fines and fees.
2. Another poster, near-homeless and physically disabled, described their struggles with cyclical late fees and a lack of clear communication from their lawyer or the court system, exacerbating their financial instability and social precarity.
3. A person confronted with past-due court fines accruing significant financial interest—thousands of dollars—due to a prolonged period of unemployment and homelessness.
4. Instances of missed court payments due to personal crises—working overtime, consoling their mom through a loss—leading to arrest warrants and suspended licenses. This person's story clearly illustrates the harsh consequences of the courts' bureaucratic inflexibility.
5. An individual who finished rehabilitation for alcoholism encounters insurmountable fees from their past, hindering their reintegration into society and restoration of their suspended license.

6. An individual struggling with minor fines of approximately \$200, which proves insurmountable due to their family's precarious financial situation on the brink of homelessness.
7. Another person faced with an unjust financial burden of paying an extra \$200 per week for drug monitoring, despite their aggravated assault case involving no drug-related offenses. Failure to afford this fee could result in a warrant for their arrest, exacerbating their already dire circumstances.

Each of these individuals' stories underscore the urgent need for systemic reform within the system of fines and fees, with a renewed focus on equity, accessibility, and alternatives to reincarceration/arrest for those unable to meet these financial obligations.

GoFundMe

The analysis of online posts on GoFundMe unveiled a profound narrative about the harsh realities faced by people and families grappling with the criminal legal system's fines and fees. These financial penalties exacerbate existing hardships, perpetuating cycles of poverty and legal complications. Often, the cyclical late penalties and additional fines are too much for people who are unemployed, homeless, or out of income to pay off in any semblance of a timely manner, leading to extremely high interest accumulation and lifelong debt.

Within the myriad posts related to fines and fees, a recurring theme is the serious barrier these financial penalties create, effectively entrapping people in a system of debt, legal entanglements, and recreating debtor's prisons in the modern day. For example, a GoFundMe campaign details

the struggles faced by a woman named Lucretia: *“Hi I’m Lucretia! I’m trying to raise money to pay to get my motorcycle out of tow. I also need it to get it legal and pay my tickets and fines. It was towed because I was trying to put a stop to some people that were selling drugs to my daughter.”* This post not only highlights the immediate, serious financial burden but also the contextual challenges that complicate her, and most other peoples’ ability to resolve the situation. License suspension due to unpaid fines is particularly cruel and paradoxical in its impact on the poor. Many individuals need their license to work and earn the money necessary to pay off their significant debts, yet they cannot afford the fines necessary for license reinstatement following the suspension of their license. This is vividly illustrated in another post: *“Driving wife’s car in 2011, pulled over and not registered/legally allowed to drive it... license was suspended, can’t afford the fines and fees to get the license back and trying to get a job.”*

Another crucial element to focus on is the reality of escalating penalties and cyclic debt. The punitive nature of the system for people who cannot afford to pay is starkly highlighted by these stories of escalating penalties, including a user who shared, *“I’m trying to raise money to get my bike out of tow and pay my fines and fees.. The police impounded my bike and wrote me some tickets.”* This poster had the fines accumulate over a long period of time, leading to their seeking aid on GoFundMe. In cases like these, initial unpaid penalties lead to further fines, creating an escalating snowball effect that eventually ends in a FTP warrant for their arrest.

Personal Narratives: Kim’s Story

Kimberly Andrews' narrative, shared seemingly by her or her family's attorney, stands out starkly in the analysis. Held under severe conditions and facing a mountain of fees, her story encapsulates the severity of the emotional and financial toll of the system:

“Kimberly Andrews was imprisoned in Allegheny County Jail, held without bond and subject to conditions that are recognized as torture... she owes nearly \$3,000 in ‘probation fees’, ‘restitution,’ and other ‘court fees.’... Our judicial system often saddles individuals with enormous debt burdens as a form of financial punishment.”

Her campaign not only seeks financial relief, but also aims to highlight broader injustices present in the system and emphasize the importance of her community's support in reentry following her experience.

Additional Noteworthy Campaigns

1. Reentry challenges: One campaign seeks to support someone's reentry post-release from prison, emphasizing the double jeopardy of living expenses coupled with outstanding fees after they'd served their time. *“Seeking financial support for life after prison, both living and paying off fines and fees.”*
2. Activist support: Another common campaign were crowdfunds to support activists or protestors facing fines for their civil disobedience. For example, *“Activists hit with fines and fees collectively raising money to prevent police/state intimidation of their movement against ICE.”*
3. Unjust burdens: Another poignant story involves an individual wrongfully burdened with weekly drug monitoring and fees unrelated to their case: *“Faced with an unjust financial*

burden of paying an extra \$200 per week for drug monitoring despite aggravated assault case involving no drug-related offense.”

The details of each of these stories paint a picture of a system more concerned with extracting revenue from and punishing those in poverty rather than addressing the underlying issues which lead to such severe outcomes. These stories make a compelling case for reconsideration of how fines and fees are imposed and managed to destroy this systemic perpetuation of cycles of unnecessary punishment and debt.

Public Defense

When it comes to peoples' experiences with public defenders, conversations of quality, accessibility, communication, and effective representation make up the bulk of the challenges described throughout subreddits like r/criminal-defense and r/legaladvice. A near constant frustration expressed by people in these posts is extreme confusion and stress regarding the assignment process and availability of a public defender, with multiple posters expressing disbelief that they did not meet income qualifications to receive public defense despite living in poverty. Countless community members express dissatisfaction with the quality of public defense services, and describe feeling neglected or wronged by their assigned representative. Often, lawyers in the comments will chime in to provide fuller context to clients new to the courtroom, and the picture they paint is a dark one. Throughout the United States, it is well documented that there is a severe dearth of public defenders— these attorneys are underpaid, overwhelmed, and often simply unavailable to communicate effectively due to their heavy caseloads, leading to frustration and dissatisfaction among their clients who, understandably, would like for their questions to be answered. Instances of individuals feeling rushed through the

court process or pressured into plea deals are common, further exacerbating feelings of being wronged or neglected by their public defenders.

Other common threads which came up in forum discussions of public defenders shed further light on the serious systemic issues inherent in the US's indigent defense system— and the criminal legal system as a whole. Sentencing requirements for programs which defendants cannot afford or that are not covered by insurance are common, forcing people to decide whether to bankrupt themselves affording a diversionary program or be reincarcerated. And, as mentioned earlier, the income limitations to qualify for a public defender, though they differ from county to county, are often incredibly stringent. At least three users shared stories of being denied public defense based on income they no longer had due to job loss from charges/arrest, spiraling more and more people into debt and financial ruin.

Concerns about the effectiveness and success rate of public defenders, as well as accusations of corruption or inadequacy, are frequently voiced. Moreover, misunderstandings about eligibility for public defense and the qualifications of public defenders are exceedingly common.

Frequently, users were fully under the impression that public defenders were not real lawyers— *“Do I need a lawyer, or will a public defender suffice?”*-- and regularly, individuals did not realize that if they could afford to hire a private attorney, they legally did not qualify for indigent defense. Lastly, the problems generated by lack of communication and overburdened representation cannot be overstated. Posters described many instances wherein their public defender failed to appear for client appointments and court dates, were unreachable for months on end, or even misfiled/didn't file a crucial element of the client's case.

Of course, some example stories were obtained in the course of my data collection which highlight these systemic issues with public defense:

1. One user shared an experience where he was unable to contact his public defender for over 180 days because his representative was out on leave. Instead of being assigned to a new attorney, this user's hearings were pushed back repeatedly, for months on end, while he sat in legal limbo.
2. Some seemingly fake stories existed, with one user claiming he was cursed out by his public defender, and repeatedly accused of defrauding the system and not actually needing his services.
3. Many users constantly worried about the lack of communication with their public defender in advance of an upcoming trial, with one individual having been to one appointment with his attorney in the last 4 months. This poster said they had heard nothing at all, despite repeated attempts at communication, and their trial was in a mere six days.
4. One user, in an all caps rant, accused their assigned representative of being in "cahoots" with the Prosecution, solely due to their unavailability.
5. In a post from Massachusetts, a user's public defender failed to appear at two consecutive court dates, and had also not shown at a client appointment.
6. Two separate users described scenarios where their representatives failed to submit a document on time to the Court, leading to arrest warrants for them. Though both of their respective situations were remediated, they both expressed the stress and trauma that the experience put them through.

7. Lastly, the most unbelievable but, unfortunately, very plausible scenario was the one described by a poster in Washington state. They had been charged with second degree homicide and were assigned to a public defender in their county. Upon meeting with the public defender, they were advised to hire private representation– which they could not afford– because the PD was too overburdened to adequately represent them. When the user asked to be assigned to a different public defender, they were informed that that attorney was the *only* public defender in the entire county.

GoFundMe

When it came to GoFundMe posts reflecting the quality or availability of indigent defense, data was minimal and difficult to identify. The most common thread found was that of individuals who barely did not qualify for a public defender, but nevertheless had to hire a private attorney, leading to extreme fees they needed to crowdfund for.

Homelessness

When delving into the experience of homeless individuals on Reddit, I noticed that a majority of posters and respondents in the r/legaladvice forum expressed disdain towards homeless populations, and were typically asking for legal methods of removing these people from their private or public spaces. Some comment sections became positive feedback loops for anti-homeless rhetoric, with one user even wondering if they would be charged with a crime for spraying a homeless person outside of their business with a water hose. In search of posts which documented the first-hand experiences of people actually enduring homelessness, I compiled a variety of posts from r/homelessness, a popular Reddit community which boasts 61,000

members, where individuals have created a supportive community in the online space. The examination of posts within this forum not only illuminated the profound challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness within the criminal system, but it also reveals how people were able to create support networks, share vital information, and express complicated, personal feelings within a public online forum. Many individuals' posts reflect the fact that homelessness is often criminalized through its intersections with various legal issues, ranging from trespassing to loitering, to sleeping or relieving oneself in public spaces where bathrooms are often unavailable. These intersections of homelessness with criminalization further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of those already marginalized by poverty and other social inequalities.

Within the subreddit *r/legaladvice*, I was able to discover some posts from homeless individuals recounting their experiences or asking for help with a criminal issue, highlighting the adversities encountered by homeless people who must navigate the legal landscape. These include situations where people face warrants for trespassing, stemming from instances such as sleeping in public areas like garages and parks, or loitering near closed facilities. Often, homeless people are targeted by police, harassed and questioned by law enforcement for simply seeking a place to rest, and the posts within *r/legaladvice* reflected that reality.

Moreover, the subreddit *r/homelessness* serves as a platform for homeless communities to share their stories, seek support, and discuss burgeoning legal and policy developments related to their status as people experiencing homelessness. Here, the challenges of finding safe places to sleep without facing legal repercussions is a common refrain, with multiple posts discussing the precarity of sleeping in cars and the fear of arrest. This fear was compounded for many people who already had suspended licenses due to a failure to pay fines, a former traffic violation, or

another unrelated offense. Additionally, individuals describe grappling with the dilemma of seeking medical care or legal support while homeless, only to face the threat of arrest for illegal camping.

Amidst these narratives, the issue of legality versus survival emerges repeatedly, with some posters intentionally seeking arrest to access shelter and food. The subreddit also serves as a resource for discussing precedent-setting court cases and popular news events or articles related to homeless experiences, fostering a genuinely supportive environment for those who are able to access the internet and post on the forum.

Again, notable stories were identified in the course of my data collection, whether they be unique instances which reveal a new element of the discussion or particularly illustrative exemplars of the common narratives discussed above.

1. One poster, who was homeless years ago but has now obtained stable housing and employment, received a ticket over a decade prior for sleeping in a public garage. In his condition, he never received notice to appear due to his lack of address and he never paid the fine— he was homeless. Now, years later, this user has had a bench warrant issued for their arrest for Failure to Pay (FTP).
2. One user described being aggressively questioned and eventually harassed by police for loitering in front of a closed library in Las Vegas, despite having written permission from the manager of the library to stay in the atrium of the doorway during off-hours.
3. Another person reported being harassed and eventually arrested despite having an owner's explicit permission to sleep outside of their business, out of view of customers.

The poster said they spoke to the owners of both businesses following his release and both denied calling the police, and told him it was okay to remain staying there.

4. One poster's condition for their pre-trial diversion program and bail was at home ankle-monitoring, but he lied about his address to his attorney and is, in fact, homeless. His post expresses frustration and heartbreak, wondering desperately if he will be able to alter the address to a shelter or if he will be forced to go back to jail.
5. One individual was in clear distress after being pulled over for driving and then sleeping in their car despite having a suspended license. They were pulled over, given a ticket and extreme fine they couldn't afford, and had their car— their only shelter— towed away. The poster had nowhere to go, and no loved ones to call for help, and will be required to report to court in a month.
6. Lastly, one man was arrested for illegally camping after a year and a half long wait to get into a doctor to manage a health condition. After being warned by the police to vacate the area within 24 hours or be jailed, the poster was forced to cancel the appointment and travel on to a whole new city, wherever that may be. They expressed real heartbreak and anger, feeling that the system was designed for it to be impossible for them to make it out of their situation.

GoFundMe

GoFundMe campaigns can provide critical support for homeless people navigating legal complexities and the direct costs associated with homelessness, with these campaigns often highlighting the intertwined nature of homelessness with legal issues and the community's role in providing support.

One campaign, started by a teacher, reflected the intersectionality of the nature of homelessness, poverty, and immigration status within the juvenile system. Trying to aid a student of hers, this is what the poster shared: *“I am working with an exceptional young man who needs help with legal fees to obtain Special Immigrant Juvenile Status. SIJS is federal protection offered to undocumented youth who have been in the USA since infancy and have suffered abuse and neglect. The legal fees amount to \$6,000.”* This campaign successfully met their goal with donations from 67 separate people, showcasing the role community support can play for homeless youth impacted by the legal system.

Another notable campaign involved a family who, following eviction and being thrust into homelessness, also experienced legal issues with subsequent fees. Their post seeking support reflects the reality that families facing homelessness often face legal challenges and even challenges to parental custody which exacerbate the condition of poverty and struggle, making community-funded legal aid crucial to regain stability and recovery. Another post, with a mother and daughter pleading for support after being made homeless due to an abusive husband, reflects how other contextual family dynamics can worsen or complicate an already dire situation.

Lastly, I want to reflect on three notable campaigns from my research which reflected unique experiences with other intertwining legal issues and homelessness:

1. A disabled homeless man got into a car accident wherein he was at fault. He posted seeking support to pay off legal fees and restitution from the accident to prevent his incarceration. His story highlights the vicious cycle where minor legal issues which

happen every day can lead to consequences as severe as incarceration for those without financial means.

2. Next, a community sought to raise money to support a homeless man against charges they saw as wrongfully filed. He got into a physical altercation trying to defend himself from another homeless individual in a mental health episode and was charged with aggravated assault due to his use of pepper spray, which he did not know was illegal. He is seeking support for legal fees as well as help getting back on his feet.
3. Lastly, a truly outrageous story where the police harassed a homeless veteran, tased his service animal, and arrested him for loitering. He posted seeking support to not only pay off fines, but also to obtain stable housing, employment, and psychiatric treatment for his PTSD. His story is not uncommon, with hundreds of thousands of homeless individuals on the street in any given night in the US being former veterans.

These campaigns reflect a broad array of legal issues and financial struggles for homeless individuals, from immigration status and self-defense to the consequences of minor infractions escalated by their living conditions. The legal fees, often insurmountable for those without stable income, represent a significant barrier to ever achieving that stability.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated the profound and varied impacts of poverty-driven criminalization, as well as poverty *caused/worsened* by criminalization in the United States through the lens of social media forum posts on Reddit and GoFundMe. By analyzing these narratives and posts, this research has brought to light crucial personal stories and perspectives which reflect not only the financial, but also the emotional and societal toll of systemic injustices within the criminal

justice system including, but not limited to, cash bail, fines and fees, indigent defense, and criminalization of homelessness.

Key Findings

1. **Systemic Barriers and Cyclical Poverty:** The narratives analyzed consistently highlighted the systemic barriers which exacerbate poverty, including egregious administration of fines and fees, the cash bail system, and the criminalization of homelessness. These systems often create insurmountable, lifelong barriers for impoverished individuals, entrenching them further into cycles of poverty and punishment and threatening incarceration.
2. **Community Support and Solidarity:** Posts on GoFundMe in particular, but Reddit to a lesser extent, emphasized the role of community support in mitigating the impacts of these systemic issues while people wait for change. Campaigns often served not only as a means to raise funds but also as platforms for raising awareness and fostering community solidarity.
3. **Legal and Ethical Challenges:** The stories revealed the ethical dilemmas and legal challenges faced by individuals, including the lack of adequate legal representation and the disproportionate targeting of marginalized communities by law enforcement.

Implications for Policy, Advocacy, and Further Research

1. **Reform of Fines and Fees:** There stands a critical need for reforms which address the imposition of punitive or excessive fines and fees that disproportionately affect our poorest citizens. Policy changes should aim to eliminate or reduce such practices, seek

other methods of increasing revenue in localities, and provide relief measures that do not further burden those already struggling.

2. **Abolish Cash Bail:** The narratives underscore the urgent need to heed the call of activists around the country and the world to abolish the cash bail system, which forces people to pay for their freedom regardless of risk assessment. It results in unnecessary pre-trial detention of people who are unable to pay or a predatory loan taken out from a bail bondsman by a loved one, creating risks and disrupting livelihoods all around.
3. **Legal System Transparency and Accessibility:** Enhancements in the legal system's communication structures which correspond to transparency, accessibility, and accountability are essential. Providing clear, accessible information and adequate legal representation can mitigate the confusion and helplessness often expressed in the narratives.
4. **Supporting Advocacy and Community Initiatives:** The findings from this study should be leveraged to support advocacy efforts aimed at reforming the identified systemic injustices. Collaborations with community organizations on the ground can amplify the impact of these efforts, ensuring that the voices of affected individuals lead the charge for change.
5. **Future Research:** This study underscores the importance of incorporating qualitative social media analyses to capture the lived experiences of people affected by poverty-driven criminalization. Future researchers are encouraged to explore similar methodologies across more diverse platforms and geographic regions to enrich our understanding of these issues globally. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that would integrate disciplines like legal studies, sociology, and digital media could yield

more comprehensive insights, fostering a deeper understanding of how digital narratives influence and reflect public policy and societal attitudes.

“Social Media as Witness: Social Media Narratives on the Criminalization of Poverty in the US” aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on social justice and legal reform by highlighting the personal, real-world impacts of punitive legal measures. By providing a platform for the voices of those directly impacted, this research emphasizes the need for comprehensive policy changes that address the root causes of poverty and criminalization, rather than merely its uncomfortable symptoms. Here, I sought to not only amplify the experiences of those ensnared by the criminal legal system, but also have this serve as a call to action for researchers, policymakers, and community leaders to advocate for true justice and change.

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