



## **Double charged: The true cost of juvenile justice**

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by ***Myles Bess*** (</people/myles-bess>)

***Thursday, May 8, 2014 - 13:50***

***Double Charged is a special investigation into the U.S. Juvenile Justice system, produced by Youth Radio (<http://www.youthradio.org/>). This is part one of a two-part series:***

Standing in the hallway outside a hearing room at the Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center, you see benches filled with teenagers and their families--waiting to appear in court-- many dressed up in button down shirts and ties, looking their Sunday best. There are a lot of moms, too, and little brothers and sisters who'd clearly rather be elsewhere.



*Families and youth wait in the hallway outside juvenile courtrooms, San Leandro, California.*

Brett Myers/Youth Radio

Many teens are here for trials and probation hearings, but on any given day, others are trying to negotiate fines and fees.

The bill starts adding up as soon as you're arrested, before anyone reaches the courtroom. Even if you're innocent, in Alameda County, the investigation alone will cost you \$250.

"You get fined for the public defender," said Debra Mendoza, probation officer-turned-advocate, who can list fees off the top of her head. "You get charged for incarceration. There's a fee for being in juvenile hall. There's a daily fee if you're on GPS."

Add the fees together for a juvenile who's been incarcerated for an average amount of time in this county, and the total bill will be close to \$2,000.

It's parents who are responsible for the bill. And that's the trend across states.

"There are more and more criminal justice fees that are added every year in this country," said Lauren-Brooke Eisen, legal scholar at NYU's Brennan Center for Justice. "In recent years, about 20 state legislatures passed laws holding parents responsible for their children's crimes," said Eisen.

In California, parents have the right to negotiate fees, but it's not easy. If they don't pay, officials can garnish parents' wages, take their tax refunds or place liens against property. In Alameda County, one of the poorest counties in the San Francisco Bay Area, half of the fees charged to parents remain unpaid. That's according to the county's own data, based on a recent five-year period.

"And sometimes it is more expensive administratively to collect these fees than the money you are actually receiving in revenue," said Eisen. "That's the great irony of the situation."



At the Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro, California, Joshua Hopkins is sitting on a bench waiting to be called into a hearing. Hopkins is 13, but he looks a lot older.

"People mess with me and then they get me frustrated, and then they just like to push my buttons. And when they push my buttons, I get very upset and I fight," Hopkins said .

The fighting has led to time in juvenile detention. And that adds up to a lot of fees, according to his mom, LaPorscha John.

"So basically this is my statement of account. So I owe a total of \$736," she said.

Because of a mental health issue, Joshua lives in a private group home. But his mom is still responsible for the court fees when he messes up. So LaPorscha John owes the money, even though her son is not in her care.

"He is my son... But I'm getting hurt, because it's financially creating hardship," she said.

Terry Wiley, Assistant District Attorney for Alameda County's Juvenile Division, said, "That's part of being a parent. You're responsible for your kids and their actions."

If young people and their families have a problem paying, Wiley said there's a straightforward solution: "Don't be committing crimes and you won't owe any money. Very simple."

For Zoe Mathews, it's not simple at all.

In 2010, her son DeShawn Morris was incarcerated for the better part of a year. Months after being released from jail, he was shot and killed. Her son was dead, but the debt lived on, including ongoing calls from county collections.

“It's a constant reminder that, no -- he's not here anymore,” she said.

Mathews' son was locked up for 208 days at a cost of almost \$30 per day.



*Zoe Mathews (right) and her mother Jackie stand in front of a wall of family photos, including childhood pictures of Zoe's son DeShawn Morris. DeShawn was killed several months after being released from Juvenile Hall and years later, his mother is still paying the fees for his incarceration.*

Teresa Chin/Youth Radio

“By being incarcerated, you're paying your debt back to society. So then they're going to charge you an additional per-night stay as if there were some options?” said Mathews. “The bills are additional stress to already a very painful situation that I will be dealing with for the rest of my life.”

Mathews said the county has agreed to reduce her monthly payment, but won't reduce the total bill: More than \$7,500 for her deceased son's fees.

*Infographics by: Teresa Chin and Jenny Lei Bolario of Youth Radio.*

***Featured in: [Marketplace for Thursday May 8, 2014 \(/shows/marketplace/marketplace-thursday-may-8-2014\)](/shows/marketplace/marketplace-thursday-may-8-2014)***

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#### **About the author**

Myles Bess is a reporter with Youth Radio.

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## 1 COMMENT



**helladuckets** replied on May 9, 2014 [PERMALINK \(/COMMENT/196841#COMMENT-196841\)](#)

I hope this podcast was produced by David Gura and isn't what I can expect from Marketplace going forward. The content was noticeably lower quality. It turns out book buyers are important to the economy? Thanks for the plug from the American Book Sellers Association. Brunei and celebrities in LA, regardless of their cause de jure, is critical to my understanding of the marketplace, thank you. The piece on holding parents responsible for their children's incarceration fees was extremely one sided. Who else is responsible to pay? Should we waive fees if you're so bad at crime you get killed? Thanks for the tea party story, useless? No, just an ad for some satirist pretending to be a story.

Please bring back Kai Ryssdal! I'd rather hear a rerun than a second rate host.

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