

The Poor Get Prison: The Alarming Spread of the Criminalization of Poverty

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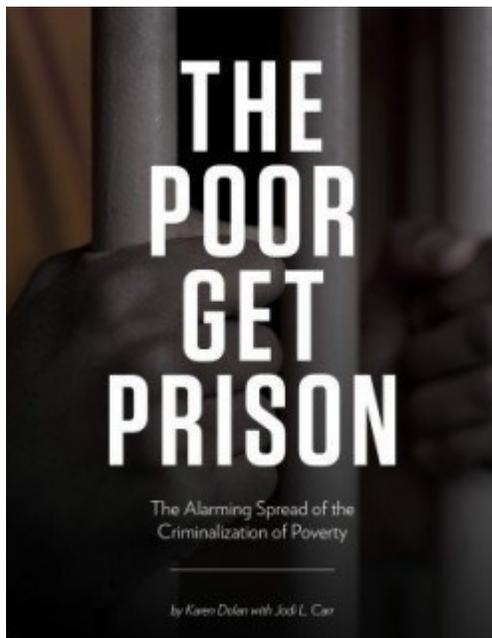
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This report provides a new understanding of the growing ways in which those in poverty are disproportionately targeted, marginalized, and prosecuted. Poor people, especially people of color, face a far greater risk of being fined, arrested, and even incarcerated for minor offenses than other Americans. A broken taillight, an unpaid parking ticket, a minor drug offense, sitting on a sidewalk, or sleeping in a park can all result in jail time. In this report, we seek to understand the multi-faceted, growing phenomenon of the “criminalization of poverty.”

In many ways, this phenomenon is not new: The introduction of public assistance programs gave rise to prejudices against beneficiaries and to systemic efforts to obstruct access to the assistance.

This form of criminalizing poverty — racial profiling or the targeting of poor black and Latina single mothers trying to access public assistance — is a relatively familiar reality. Less well-known are the new and growing trends which increase this criminalization of being poor that affect or will affect hundreds of millions of Americans. These troubling trends are eliminating their chances to get out of poverty and access resources that make a safe and decent life possible.

In this report we will summarize these realities, filling out the true breadth and depth of this national crisis. The key elements we examine are:

the targeting of poor people with fines and fees for misdemeanors, and the resurgence of debtors' prisons – the imprisonment of people unable to pay debts resulting from the increase in fines and fees;
mass incarceration of poor ethnic minorities for non-violent offenses, and the barriers to employment and re-entry into society once they have served their sentences;
excessive punishment of poor children that creates a “school-to-prison pipeline”;
increase in arrests of homeless people and people feeding the homeless, and criminalizing life-sustaining activities such as sleeping in public when no shelter is available; and
confiscating what little resources and property poor people might have through “civil asset forfeiture.”

[Read the full report \[PDF\].](#)