

Thank you, Chairman Nadler and Ranking Member Collins, for giving us the opportunity to come before you today and highlight issues that are important to our constituents and to the American people. I want to come before you to speak about an insidious practice that too often survives in the shadows. That is the use of fines and fees in our juvenile justice system.

Today, in America – the richest country in the world – children are being locked away because they are poor. That may sound like a harsh statement, but it is the reality of what is going on in towns and cities across the country. Currently, most states and many localities – not some, but **most** -- continue to charge juveniles and their families fines and fees within the juvenile justice system. Many families cannot overcome the financial burden of compounding legal charges, which can have devastating effects for these families and their communities. The types of charges faced by these children and their families vary, but include things like: court expenses, fees for a public defender, fees for evaluation and testing, probation supervision fees and costs, fees for participation in diversion programs, treatment costs including mental health treatment and rehabilitative programming, the cost of GPS monitoring, and the cost of care. The list goes on.

These costs create new obstacles for children and their families and are problematic when youth who would otherwise remain at home with their families may be incarcerated solely because they are unable to pay fees. This is true even when they pose no danger to the community and have no immediate need for services. Rather than improving public safety, this practice contributes to increased risks, as a report in Tennessee found that the imposition of fines and fees can significantly increase the likelihood of youth reoffending. Many of these juveniles are too young to have jobs themselves and can be pressured into committing crimes to pay off mounting legal fees -- ultimately landing them back in a juvenile-detention facility. These youth are at risk for lasting physical and psychological injury due to their financial circumstances, as facilities often have high rates of physical and sexual violence. The longer these children and adolescents remain in these environments the greater the risk of harm.

Although these fines and fees are commonplace, the net financial benefit to the governments that use them are typically small or often **lose** money because collection agencies must be hired to try to get money from these families who may never be able to pay.

Many states engage in this practice based on the mistaken belief that it encourages family engagement or serves as an important source of revenue. By establishing a grant program to provide meaningful resources for intervention programs states can actually achieve those goals and even prevent juveniles' initial involvement in the justice system.

That is why I introduced HR 2300, the Eliminating Debtor's Prison for Kids Act. This bill incentivizes states to terminate the harmful practice of using fines and fees in the juvenile justice system by providing grants to mental and behavioral health programs for at-risk youth. Additionally, funds will be utilized to research the effects of fines and fees in the criminal legal system at large to aid policymakers in determining best practices.

Eliminating unnecessary and cumbersome fees and fines from the juvenile criminal justice system can keep many families from falling deeper into debt and keep youths from out of prison. This unfair, broken system needlessly targets low-income families who cannot overcome the burden of these charges and ultimately suffer the consequences. California became the first state to eliminate court costs, fees and fines for juveniles and we need to encourage other states to do the same. This bill has been endorsed by

over 40 groups and is co-sponsored by several of the members of this very Committee. I hope we can work together to pass this bill, and to improve the lives of children throughout America. Thank you.