Criminal Justice

Criminal Justice Debt: 2021 Federal Legislative Priorities

Collection Actions

Details consumer defenses to debt buyer and creditor collection lawsuits on credit card, medical, and other consumer debts.

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The U.S. criminal justice system disproportionately burdens low-income individuals and people of color, as well as their families and communities. The National Consumer Law Center focuses on the intersection of criminal and consumer law, and their role in equitable criminal justice reform.

Criminal Background Checks

- Report: Broken Records Redux: How Errors by Criminal Background Check Companies Continue to Harm Consumers Seeking Jobs and Housing, Dec. 2019

Archive+

COVID-19

- Group letter supporting the inclusion of the COVID-19 Compassion and Martha Wright Prison Phone Justice provisions of HR 6800 in the next COVID-19 package, August 11, 2020
- Written Testimony of NCLC before the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Joint Committee on the Judiciary Supporting H.4652, An Act Regarding Decarceration and COVID-19, May 5, 2020

Criminal Justice Debt

Fact Sheets

- What States Can Do: Criminal Justice Debt, Sept. 2019

Reports & Press Releases

Press Release: U.S. House Financial Services Committee Hearing on September 26 on Abusive Debt Collection with Testimony by National Consumer Law Center Attorney April Kuehnhoff, Sept. 25, 2019


Report: Criminal Justice Debt in the South: A Primer for the Southern Partnership to Reduce Debt, Dec. 2018


A collaborative three-part initiative by the National Consumer Law Center and Harvard Law School’s Criminal Justice Policy Program.

Testimony

Testimony of NCLC attorney April Kuehnhoff before the U.S. House Financial Services Committee re: Examining Legislation to Protect Consumers and Small Business Owners from Abusive Debt Collection Practices, Sept. 26, 2019, Press Release

Discusses the Debt Collection Practices Harmonization Act (H.R. 3948), which would ensure that individuals with criminal justice debts are protected from unfair and abusive debt collection practices by private companies.

Written Testimony of Brian Highsmith, NCLC’s Skadden Fellow, before Before the Judiciary Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly, 2019 Regular Session, March 25, 2019

Written Testimony of Brian Highsmith, NCLC’s Skadden Fellow, before New York State’s Department of Financial Services, Division of Consumer Protection and Division of Criminal Justice Services, Bail Bond Reform Listening Session, June 11, 2018

Letters

Group Letter to Biden-Harris Administration on Fines and Fees Reforms, April 7, 2021

Group letter to the FCC urging adoption of final rules to reduce the cost of phone calls for the incarcerated and their families, November 23, 2020; Reply letter, January 22, 2021

Group letter urging Connecticut Legislative Office to pass legislation to stop charging families for prison phone calls, September 17, 2020

Group letter urging U.S. Senate to include Prison Phone Justice in Next Stimulus Package, September 10, 2020

Group letter urging Massachusetts legislators to pass No Cost Calls legislation, S. 2846, September 3, 2020

130 groups Call for a Nationwide Moratorium on Juvenile Fees and Fines, May 13, 2020

Coalition Letter in Support of the Martha Reed Wright Just and Reasonable Communications Act of 2019, S.1764, June 11, 2019

Webinar Archive


Driving with Debt: What Attorneys and Organizers Can Do to Address the Problem of Driver’s License Suspensions for Court Debt, January 31, 2019

Confronting Criminal Justice Debt Free Webinar Series (cosponsored by The National
Consumer Law Center and the Criminal Justice Policy Program at Harvard Law School:

- The Advocacy Gap: Meeting the Urgent Need for Counsel to Represent Individuals in Criminal Debt Proceedings, Oct. 10, 2017
- Using Bankruptcy Law to Aid Criminal Justice Debtors, Oct. 17, 2017
- Introduction to Harvard’s Criminal Justice Policy Program’s 50-State Criminal Justice Debt Law Web Tool, March 1, 2018
- Ensuring that People Are Not Jailed Due to Poverty: Reforming Policies and Representing Clients in Criminal Justice Debt “Ability to Pay” Proceedings (May 22, 2018)
- Affirmative Litigation of Criminal Justice Debt Abuses-Theory and Practice (March 16, 2018)

Litigation

Tools & Resources

- Bail & Corrections Industry Abuses Litigation Tracker (Last updated Sept. 2020)
- Commercialized (In)Justice Litigation Guide: Applying Consumer Laws to Commercial Bail, Prison Retail, and Private Debt Collection, June 2020

Cases

- Crain & Serna v Accredited Surety and Casualty Co., et al., Case No RG1900-4509 Complaint and Press Release
  NCLC has filed a class-action lawsuit, with our partners at Lieff Cabraser Heimann & Bernstein LLP, Justice Catalyst Law, Public Counsel, and Towards Justice, in which we are challenging a scheme to inflate the price of bail premiums in the state of California. The lawsuit was filed in California state court on Jan 29, 2019, against the surety companies that underwrite bail bonds and the state and national trade associations representing the bail bond industry. Plaintiffs allege that an unlawful antitrust conspiracy has kept bail bond premiums higher than they would be if the California bail-bonds market functioned competitively. This scheme, ongoing since at least 2004, has not only made bail bonds costlier for California consumers, but also resulted in more people spending time in jail while awaiting trial—separated from their families, jobs, and lives. The suit seeks damages for the hundreds of thousands of Californians who have overpaid for unlawfully inflated bail bond premiums and also injunctive relief to end the overcharges going forward.
- Pearson et al v Hodgson and Securus Technologies, Inc, Case No. 18-1360, Complaint and Press Release
- Egana v Blair’s Bail Bonds, Inc. Case No. 2:17-cv-5899 First Amended Complaint
  Plaintiffs, an accused and others who agreed to indemnify the bail bond company in case of loss, filed this action on behalf of themselves and all individuals whose rights under federal and state law were violated when they contracted with Defendants for a bail bond to secure their own or their loved ones’ release from jail. The Amended Complaint describes the process through which Defendant bail bond company agreed to allow plaintiffs to finance the premium for the bond, but utilized contracts that violate the Truth in Lending Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1601 et seq. by failing to make necessary disclosures, and state contract, conversion, and usury laws by requiring payment of amounts above what state law allows, including paying daily fees for ankle monitors supplied by another company. The FAC also alleges that Defendants violated the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act, 18 U.S.C. § 1962 (RICO) and the
Louisiana Racketeering Act, La. Stat. Ann. § 15:1351, by conspiring to employ or contract with bounty hunters to kidnap, detain, and threaten to jail principals unless they or their loved ones paid money that was distributed between Defendants. NCLC’s co-counsel are The Southern Poverty Law Center and the firm of Wilmer Hale

**Criminal Justice Archive**

*For Attorneys:*

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Continuing updates and additional information concerning criminal justice debt will be available for subscribers to this legal treatise.

**Consumer Bankruptcy Law and Practice**

*For Consumers:*

**Guide to Surviving Debt**