

Small Crimes, Life-Changing Punishments By Cyurs Klinenberg

Devoureaux Wolf was getting a ride home friends in 2016 when the police pulled them over for not wearing seatbelts. As Wolf was taken out of the car and wrestled to the ground, a friend in the front recorded it on a cellphone. Falsely charged with three counts of aggravated battery to an officer and two counts of resisting arrest, according to the Chicago Tribune, “Wolf, a 27-year-old spent 3 and a half months in Chicago’s Cook County Jail because he couldn’t pay bail.” Three and a half months, without a way to make money and no way to pay the bail. Clearly, our country’s bail system punishes the poor and forces them to do time.

When people are arrested for misdemeanors, or small crimes lower than a felony, they’re taken to a waiting room to have their initial hearing. Usually these hearings take less than a minute, but due to mass arrests, you can wait hours for a 30-second trial where the judge only gives you a new trial date. The Chicago Tribune states that, “Nationally, an average of 700,000 people are behind bars each day because they cannot afford to pay their bail, according to National Bail Out.” This means that 700,000 people are in prison for crimes they haven’t even been tried for. When waiting to be tried, people lose hours of work and pay for those hours. How do they continue to pay for food and housing? CNBC notes that “Just 40 percent of Americans could pay an unexpected 1000 dollar expense.” The bail system targets the 60% of people who can’t afford to pay bail.

We need a national bail reform system like New York. NY’s system doesn’t allow judges to put a set bail on most misdemeanors. It keeps people who are brought in just to fill up police quotas working and in the community. Writers Emily Bazelon and Insha Rahman note in their NYT opinion piece that, “The number of people held on bail in Brooklyn declined by 43 percent [since the law was put in place]... In 2019, the Bronx and Manhattan followed Brooklyn’s lead with similar results.” If this was the law throughout the country, people like Devoureaux would not have had to spend months in jail, hurting themselves and society at large as well.

You can help this issue by voting for politicians in favor of bail reform and helping to register people to vote. You can also donate to organizations like Chicago Community Bond Fund that help people pay bail who can’t afford it. An unfair bail system just widens discrimination in our country and unfairly burdens the poor and people of color, and this inherently undemocratic.

Sources:

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