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Reinvestment Partners Report Shows Debt Spiral from Criminal Justice Debt

A new report by Reinvestment Partners examines the spiral of debt for many state residents who are involved in the criminal justice system. The report finds that criminal justice debt disproportionately impacts people of color and can leave lasting impacts on their families and communities.

Chukuemeka Manning's story shows how the cycle of criminalization can lead to a debt spiral. At age 15, he made a major mistake that landed him in Durham County jail. His family was living paycheck to paycheck at the time and they were not able to pay the bond to get him out. He ended up with a felony conviction, owing court costs, fines and a restitution payment of almost \$7000. He also had to pay \$50 a month for probation. In Mr. Manning's words, "we tend to be punished twice." He was punished once for his wrongdoing and again for not being able to pay his court debt. Each time he tried to turn his life around he was pulled back into the system.

Today, years later, with support from family and friends, Mr. Manning has slowly put his life back together. He makes sure to visit the jail every week to encourage other men in the facility. He is also the Community Outreach Coordinator for the Durham Innovation Team, working to address the challenges of justice-involved residents. But not everyone is able to break the cycle.

"Our research shows that during fiscal year 2017, 749 Durham residents had driver license revocations due to failure to appear or pay court costs. There are nearly one million state residents without a driver license today, meaning they struggle to find work, support their families, or pay outstanding debts," says staff researcher Quisha Mallette.

The report by Reinvestment Partners proposes several principles of fairness concerning the cost burden for individuals and families impacted by the criminal justice system, including ensuring that costs for use of state and local government resources, such as the court system, do not unfairly burden households with low and moderate incomes.

The report laments that a few financial missteps could lead many people into a debt spiral, where 'debt begets more debt.'