

RESOURCE GUIDE

# Highway Robbery: How a Small-town Traffic Trap Became a Legal Black Hole



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70 Million is made possible by a grant from the Safety and Justice Challenge at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.



million

ONE JAIL AT A TIME.

*story*

# Fining the Community to Fund the Local Government

Unjust methods of taxing residents of the communities through fines, fees and ticketing have long upheld the funding of local police forces, and government revenue. A *Fines, Fees and Forfeitures* report by the [Urban Institute](#) reported, "In 2017 (the most recent year data are available), fines, fees, and forfeitures provided 1.0 percent of general revenue for cities and townships." Compare this to Brookside, Alabama, a small, majority-white town with less than 2,000 people, where 49% of its general revenue was provided by fines, fees, and forfeitures in 2020. [John Archibald, Reporter for AL.com](#) found that the Brookside police department taxed its residence \$610,307 by strong-arming residents at the town's infamous traffic trap. "By 2020 Brookside made more misdemeanor arrests than it has residents." Archibald reports. And the excessive fines and fees of ticketing, towing and vehicle impoundment, and jail time left the town's citizens unable to pay— leading to more fines and jail time. "Brookside is a poster child for policing for profit," said Carla Crowder, the director of Alabama [Appleseed Center for Law & Justice](#), a nonprofit devoted to justice and equity. "We are not safer because of it." Many citizens have ongoing lawsuits against the town, such as Sandra Harris, Brookside resident and Vincent Witt, a pastor in the town of Lipscomb, south of Brookside. Sandra feared for her life after being pulled over by Brookside police officers that when she did make it home that night, she recorded her experience in a binder. Sandra shared, "I still think about it. I still relive it. Sometimes I go in my little space area and I just cry out to God, "What did I do to be treated like this?"



THE 'WELCOME TO BROOKSIDE' SIGN GREETES VISITORS AND LOCALS ENTERING THE TOWN OF BROOKSIDE, ALA. PHOTO CREDIT: AMARR CROSKEY



SANDRA HARRIS, PHOTOGRAPHED IN HER HOME. PHOTO CREDIT: AMARR CROSKEY

**Unraveling the story of Brookside requires some digging. On the surface, it's a story about a small southern town and its traffic trap. But underneath that story are a series of surprising discoveries about a state with a long history of fining residents for minor crimes, and the people who say they nearly lost their lives and their livelihoods after encounters with Brookside Police, people who are fighting back.**

**- RHANA NATOUR, REPORTER**

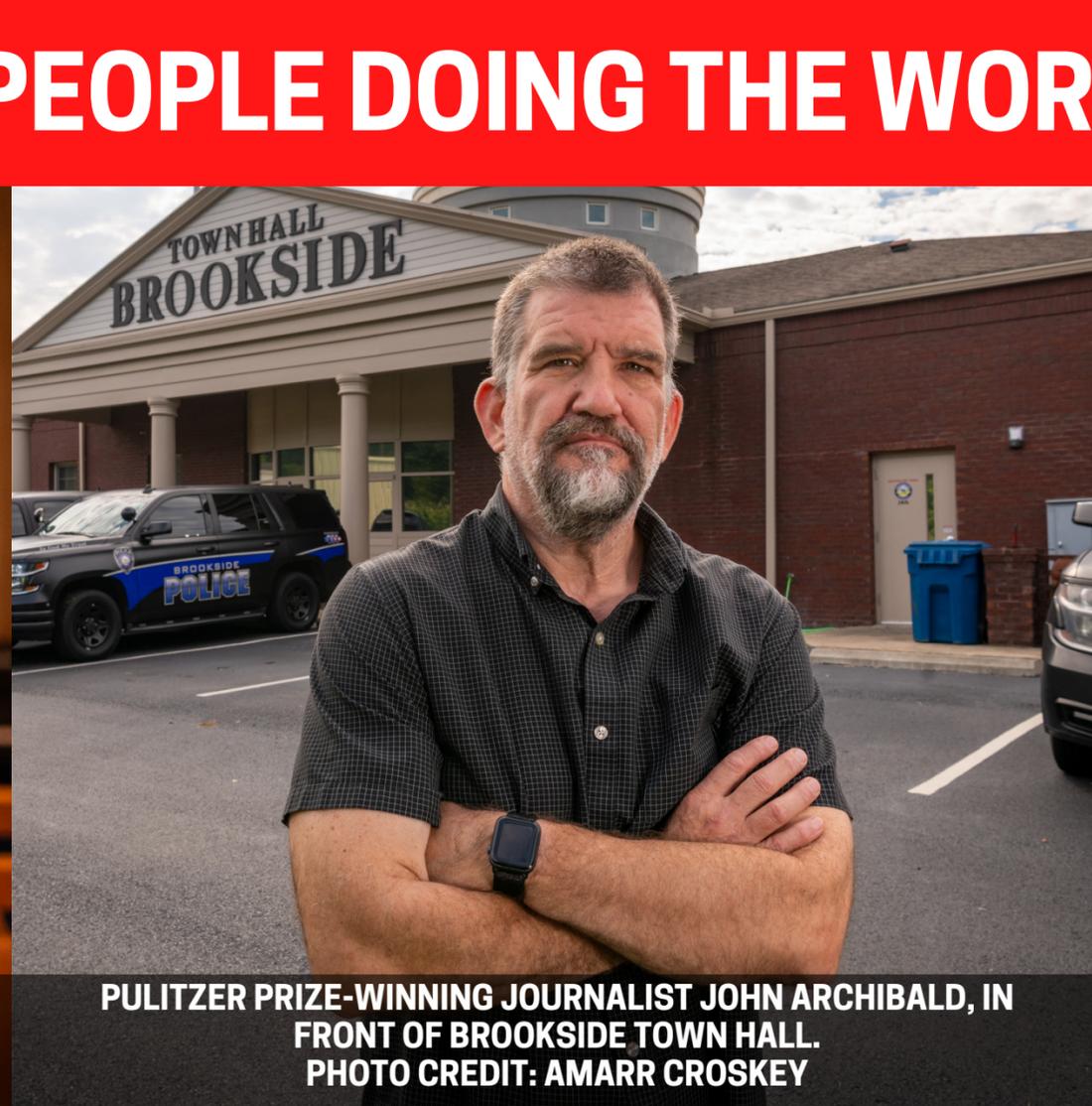
## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are the fining practices and laws like in your area? Are there specific areas where you're local police force targets the community to issue tickets, validate unwarranted searches, or present unnecessary fines? Do your elected officials— Police Chief, Judges, Mayor let these unjust practices fly over their heads?

# PEOPLE DOING THE WORK



REVEREND VINCENT WITT PHOTOGRAPHED AT HIS CHURCH IN LIPSCOMB, AL. WHEELING MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHAPEL CHURCH. PHOTO CREDIT: AMARR CROSKEY



PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING JOURNALIST JOHN ARCHIBALD, IN FRONT OF BROOKSIDE TOWN HALL. PHOTO CREDIT: AMARR CROSKEY



SANDRA HARRIS, PHOTOGRAPHED IN HER HOME. PHOTO CREDIT: AMARR CROSKEY.

## **Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice**

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law and Justice is a non-profit, non-partisan 501(c)(3) organization founded in 1999 whose mission is to work to achieve justice and equity for all Alabamians

## **Institute for Justice**

IJ is a nonprofit, public-interest law firm. Our mission is to end widespread abuses of government power and secure the constitutional rights that allow all Americans to pursue their dreams.

## **Fines and Fees Justice Center**

The Fines and Fees Justice Center (FFJC) is catalyzing a movement to eliminate the fines and fees that distort justice. Our goal is to create a justice system that treats individuals fairly, ensures public safety and community prosperity, and is funded equitably.

## **National Task Force on Fines, Fees and Bail Practices**

The Conference of Chief Justices (CCJ) and the Conference of State Court Administrators (COSCA) formed a National Task Force on Fines, Fees and Bail Practices to address the ongoing impact that these legal financial obligations (LFOs) have on economically disadvantaged communities and to draft model statutes and court rules for setting, collecting, and waiving court-imposed payments.

## **Equal Justice Initiative - Unjust Fees and Fines**

The Equal Justice Initiative is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.

**"They gave me at least five, six tickets every stop, and I was jailed every time. Every time I went to jail I spent over \$1,500 to \$1,600."  
- BROOKSIDE RESIDENT**

# LEARN MORE

A lot of the arrests came in for things like rolling a stop sign. Then you were likely searched, and if you were searched that means they brought their drug-sniffing dogs, including one named cash to search a car and they would often find a reason to arrest you on multiple charges.

- JOHN ARCHIBALD, REPORTER

## Reading



**Under Pressure** by Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice

**Following the Money on Fines and Fees** by Aravind Boddupalli, Livia Mucciolo with Urban Institute

**A permanent wound: How the slave tax warped Alabama finances** by Brian Lyman with Montgomery Advertiser

**Inside the remarkable rise and fall of Alabama's most predatory police force** by John Archibald with AL.com

**Special Report Regarding Racial Profiling in the Town of Brookside's Traffic Enforcement Program** by Ken Simon Law

## Videos



**Pulled Over/Pulled Under**  
by AL.com

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