

Interactive document



Paying the Price of Police Harassment

Discriminatory Fines Target Black and Arab Youth in France





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(RE)CLAIM is a French NGO that was founded in 2022 to leverage legal tools to advance equality and justice. It partners with grassroots groups, communities, organizations, and movements, lifting up their voices and perspectives, to realize the principle of equality in practice. Its legal strategies complement and enhance the impacts of classic strategies—legislative advocacy, public education, communication, and grassroots organizing—increasing pressure for systemic change.

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Maison Communautaire pour un Développement Solidaire (Community House for Solidarity Development, MCDS) is a French NGO founded in 2014 that fights against discrimination and promotes equality in relations between the police and impacted communities, particularly young people. It works locally through popular education and community development, and at the national and international levels through documentation, advocacy, and legal action.



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Summary

These fines have allowed us to ... [to put] an end to procedures that were too lengthy and therefore ineffective. ... [They produce] results ... [and] hit where it really hurts, which is the wallet—excuse my bluntness.

— French President Emmanuel Macron, September 2021

All these fines for a minor who is barely 13 years old and, in no position to understand what’s happening to them. ... Fining a child shouldn’t be allowed anywhere in the world. ... I ask myself, ‘How am I going to pay for this? I don’t have the money.’

— David, 19, Paris, February 2025

David grew up in a low-income household in a central Parisian working-class neighborhood, home to a large population of immigrant origins since the 1960s. He has lived with daily, invasive police identity checks since he was 10 years old. When he turned 13, police started to issue on-the-spot fixed penalty fines in his neighborhood as police alleged that he and his friends made too much noise when talking in the neighborhood park, playing soccer, or standing outside a school. David received dozens of these fines throughout his childhood for ordinary childhood activities that are important for children’s development. He could not afford to pay these fines. As a child, David did not understand their implications. When he started working at 18 years old, the state garnished parts of his modest salary to collect his unpaid fine debt that now amounted to thousands of euros due to penalty increases imposed on unpaid fines. The economic hardship that such exorbitant fine debt causes on young people from low-income households, like David, also extends to their families, in David’s case, his single parent mother. David’s story is emblematic of experiences of the racialized young men documented in this report.

A series of amendments to the law since 2012 granted police broad powers to impose on-the-spot fixed penalty fines (“fines”) for behavior classified as minor criminal offenses. The fine amount depends on the classification of an offense. Fines for minor offenses range between €11 and €135. After 45 days, unpaid fines automatically increase to nearly three times their initial amount.

The government justified expanding police fining powers on the basis of increasing efficiency and relieving the burden on the criminal justice system. The system of fines is posited on a belief that police exercise their powers with little or no margin of error, discrimination, and abuse, that fines only have minor or limited impacts on fined persons, and that police exercise their powers fairly, equitably, and without discrimination.

Police have used their fining powers in a discriminatory and abusive manner targeting Black and Arab young people who were already negatively affected by frequent discriminatory police identity checks, frisks, and searches.

France's independent human rights bodies, the Defender of Rights and the National Consultative Commission on Human Rights, have raised concerns about rights violations, including procedural violations, ensuing from amended fining procedures, and warned about the serious impacts on young men and boys perceived as Black, Arab, or North African from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods. Fining practices have created a system of police-administered on-the-spot criminal penalties with no meaningful judicial oversight or procedural safeguards.

A study of the Defender of Rights showed that fines, alongside persistent and widespread racial profiling, such as routine discriminatory identity checks, frisks, and searches, provide police with a powerful tool to harass, discriminate, and de facto evict from public spaces, young people whom the police label as "undesirables" in their databases and official documents.

This joint report by Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM, and Maison Communautaire pour un Développement Solidaire (Community House for Solidarity Development, MCDS) documents the experiences of racialized youth being fined for three specific public disturbance offenses. It also provides analysis of the rights violations enabled by and embedded in fining procedures.

The report finds the abuses ensuing from these fining practices violate international and European human rights law, including the prohibition on racial discrimination, fair trial rights, a right to remedy, and children's rights. Fine debt also negatively affects boys', young men's, and parents' enjoyment of their economic and social rights under international and European human rights law.

Police routinely invoke three public disturbance offenses, namely, noise nuisances, littering, and illegal discharge of unsanitary liquids (usually spitting), to punish racialized youth's ordinary, everyday activities by levying fines on them. Young people told us that they received their first fines as children, which accumulated up to tens of thousands of euros in debt by the time they reached young adulthood.

Young men reported that they were repeatedly fined, often by the same police officers, who knew them and their personal details from frequent identity checks. They said that police fabricated offenses to issue multiple fines at one time. Numerous young men emphasized that they received fines for alleged offenses in locations they could not have been physically present at, including when they were hospitalized or abroad. They said police also often imposed fines without interaction or verification of identity.

When Faysal was 16 years old, he received five fines at one time, which, after penalty increases for non-payment, added up to a total of €1,680. His fine debt record showed that his total debt for 25 fines totaled nearly €8,000 in the following three years.

A mother of three sons covered a kitchen table with a pile of her sons' fine notices, estimating the total fine debt at around €30,000.

Young people are frequently unaware of their fines because they either had no contact with the police when they issued the fines or because they never received their initial fine notices, which are sent by mail.

The large number of fines that many young people receive throughout their childhood and may continue to receive during young adulthood makes it difficult or impossible for them to keep track of how much fine debt they owed or to contest their fines.

Additionally, individuals who attempted to contest fines often faced procedural and practical barriers that the Defender of Rights has found undermine people's fundamental fair trial guarantees under criminal procedure, including the presumption of innocence, the right to be informed of the charges in sufficient detail to mount a defense, and the right to adversarial proceedings before an independent judge.

Contesting a fine requires proving that the police report on which the fine is based is erroneous as police reports enjoy a legal presumption of accuracy. People have only the limited information contained in a fine notice—if they received the notice—which does not provide details of the circumstances of the alleged offense necessary to contest a fine.

Requests to contest fines have to be sent to a designated officer acting under the authority of the public prosecutor (*Officier du Ministère Public, OMP*), who determines whether a request is admissible. While the law requires that this determination is based only on formal criteria, in practice, decisions are often based on the merits provided in police reports and challenges dismissed, which exceeds the OMP's powers. In rare cases where requests do reach the police court, the judge often rules by summary criminal order without hearing the person concerned. A report of the Court of Audit (*Cour des comptes*), France's supreme public audit body, found that the OMP transferred an extremely low number of requests to the police court.

Contesting fines also carries financial risks—in the event the court rules against the challenge, the person may be required to pay both court costs and face an increased fine.

When young people face mounting fine debt from their childhood until adulthood, the cumulative impacts of fines on them and their families are grave. Debts can reach tens of thousands of euros, driven by dozens of fines and automatic penalty increases for unpaid dues and debt collection fees.

The public treasury's debt collection measures—including garnishing of wages, seizure of funds from bank accounts, and deduction of people's social security benefits such as unemployment benefits—can push young people and their families from low-income households into poverty and undermine their rights to an adequate standard of living and to protection from poverty and social exclusion.

Young people reported leaving formal employment, closing bank accounts, or working undeclared to avoid debt collection, reflecting how the system may discourage participation in formal labor markets and access to social security, as well as create anxiety and undermine people's ability to sustain an adequate standard of living, or to live lives free from poverty and social exclusion.

Parents are not legally responsible for their children's fines, but as fine notices are sent to their homes and fines increase if left unpaid, parents feel obliged to pay their sons' fines. Mothers who paid their son's fines reported that they sacrificed other basic expenses to do so, while experiencing chronic stress, illness, and exhaustion.

Beyond direct economic harms, the report highlights other harmful impacts of fines. Discriminatory and abusive fine practices are designed to render targeted youth invisible in public spaces; they reinforce marginalization and segregation from society. Out of fear of receiving more such fines, young men reported that they withdrew from communal and public life, avoided spending time in public spaces, and restricted their movements.

Although an on-the-spot fining system for sanctioning minor public offenses is not inherently incompatible with human rights and rule of law, the manner in which the system operates in France, based in the Criminal Code but without corresponding or adequate procedural safeguards, administered by police with a well-documented and acknowledged pattern of racial profiling and discriminatory policing practices, renders it abusive and contrary to France's human rights obligations.

French authorities should remove noise nuisances, illegal discharge of unsanitary liquids, and littering most commonly used against young people, particularly those perceived as Black, Arab, or North African, from the Criminal Code and cancel all outstanding fine debt for the offenses addressed in this report. French authorities should take immediate measures to bring an end to discriminatory and abusive policing practices, including by ensuring effective independent oversight and data collection at both national and local level to detect such practices. Finally, authorities should work with communities to fundamentally reform and invest in new approaches to tackling community concerns around public disorder in ways that do not marginalize and harm those same communities.

Methodology

Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM, a French NGO, and Maison Communautaire pour un Développement Solidaire (Community House for Solidarity Development, MCDS), a Parisian community organization, conducted research jointly for this report.

The impetus for this research with Human Rights Watch came from MCDS's community youth work in the course of which they first observed a pattern of abusive fining. This was followed by interviews with young people conducted by MCDS and (RE)CLAIM as well as analysis of documents and policies.

The joint research took place between February 2025 and April 2026. The report is based on 42 interviews. We also reviewed reports by the Defender of Rights, the French National Consultative Committee on Human Rights, and France's Court of Audit, as well as academic studies and media reports describing the widespread and racialized nature of fining practices as well as the lack of safeguards against abuse.

The report is based on interviews with 21 young people who received dozens of fines. Except for one interview with an unhoused woman who had similar but also distinct experiences, interviews involved young men between the ages of 18 and 38; 16 of them were 25 or younger. All the young men attested to their childhood experiences, including one interviewee who described being fined at age 13. All interviewees had experienced discriminatory identity checks at even earlier ages.

The report is also based on interviews with 11 parents of young people who received fines: nine mothers and two fathers who are also police officers.

In addition, interviews with two other police officers—one in retirement—were conducted for policy, data, and institutional analysis. Interviews were also conducted with seven professionals working with youth from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods.

Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM consulted fine debt records of young people where these were available to understand fining patterns and debt levels.

The interviews focused on areas in central Paris (arrondissements 10, 11, 12, 13, 18, 19, and 20), communes in Paris' outskirts, including the Seine Saint-Denis and Essonne departments, as well as the Greater Lyon area and Grenoble. Interviewees asked for exact areas not to be disclosed for fear of reprisals by the authorities.

The research focused primarily on experiences of boys and young men perceived as Black, Arab, or North African from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods. Growing evidence from national human rights bodies indicates they are far more likely to receive numerous abusive fines than girls and young women and people who do not live in these neighborhoods. In accordance with international human rights law, in this report the word "child" refers to any person under the age of 18. This report also uses the term "youth" and "young people" in the sense of the commonly used French term *jeunes*, which typically refers to teenagers and people in their 20s.

All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview and the ways in which the information would be used, and offered anonymity in our reporting. This report withholds identifying information for most interviewees to protect their privacy and security, including the young men, their parents, police officers, as well as social workers due to potential risks of reprisals by the authorities. This fear of reprisals demonstrates the pervasive nature and severity of police harassment. No interviewee received financial or other incentives.

Interviews were conducted in French only, and we used our translations of material from interviews, French-language legal documents and secondary sources.

On March 24, 2025, Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM submitted a freedom of information request to the Interior Ministry's statistical department on internal security (service statistique ministériel de la sécurité intérieure) and the Paris Police Prefecture asking for anonymized data on fines. We requested data disaggregated by indicators that would enable a statistical analysis of police implementation of fines for public disturbance offenses, aiming to build an empirical picture of any disproportionate, discriminatory, or abusive criminal penalties against specific groups or parts of the population.

The Paris Police Prefecture has not responded to our request. On August 1, 2025, the Interior Ministry responded but did not provide the data, stating it did not have a

centralized data system with the capacity to gather all data from across all law enforcement agencies. In response, on February 20, 2026, Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM sent a follow-up reminder to the ministry. The ministry has not responded at time of writing.

On May 22, 2026, Human Rights Watch sent a right-to-reply letter to Interior Minister Laurent Nuñez and the Minister Delegate for Equality between Women and Men, Diversity, and Equal Opportunities (*Ministre déléguée chargée de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes et de la lutte contre les discriminations*) to inform them of the report's key findings and analysis, and to seek their comment to a list of questions.

In a response received on June 15 and dated June 3, Nuñez disputed our finding that the fines amount to harassment, noting that those subject to fines have a right of appeal and described them as an “indispensable tool to restore everyday security.” He confirmed that the designation of “undesirables” in police computer systems has effectively been removed.

I. Background: Racial Profiling

French police enjoy broad and unchecked powers that result in discriminatory and abusive police practices.

Persistent and Pervasive Discriminatory Identity Checks

Racial profiling by French police is a well-documented, longstanding, pervasive problem in France, involving repeated, baseless police identity checks and stops as well as invasive, humiliating body pat downs and searches targeted at young men and boys as young as 10 years old perceived as Black, Arab, or North African from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods in France.¹

Under article 78-2 of the French Code of Criminal Procedure, French police have the authority to stop anyone to verify their identity, without the need for reasonable suspicion of involvement in crime or illegal activities. Police may also stop anyone they believe to have committed or attempted to commit, or is preparing to commit, a crime, or may have information of use to a police investigation. Checks can also be carried out at the request of the public prosecutor, which allows for the targeting of any person in a specified area and for the period specified in the request. There are no specific regulations or laws governing identity checks of children.

This overbroad discretion for police to stop virtually anyone at any time, leaving ample space for discrimination to play a role in who is stopped, has repeatedly come under European and international scrutiny.²

¹ Human Rights Watch, "They Talk to Us Like We're Dogs"—Abusive Police Stops in France (France: Human Rights Watch 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/06/18/they-talk-us-were-dogs/abusive-police-stops-france>.

² See for example, UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), Prevention of Racial Discrimination, including Early Warning and Urgent Action Procedures, Statement 3 (2023) on France, INT_CERD_SWA_9833_E, July 7, 2023; and European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, ECRI report on France: sixth monitoring report, adopted on June 28, 2022, paras. 112-113.

In 2016, the Court of Cassation (*Cour de cassation*), France’s highest court of appeal, ruled in a historic case that discriminatory identity checks constituted “a gross fault that engages the responsibility of the State.”³

In 2017, the Defender of Rights (*Défenseur des Droits*), France’s independent ombudsperson, also denounced the practice, finding that police are “twenty times” more likely to stop and search young men who are perceived as Black or Arab compared to persons who do not belong to visible racial or ethnic minorities.⁴ The Defender of Rights’ 2025 study confirmed that discriminatory checks remain persistent.⁵

In July 2021, Human Rights Watch, Maison Communautaire pour un Développement Solidaire (Community House for Solidarity Development, MCDS), together with four other French and international civil society groups, filed a class action suit against the French state before the Council of State (*Conseil d’État*), France’s highest administrative court, seeking a court order that French authorities take the necessary measures to put an end to this longstanding, persistent, and systemic problem.⁶

In October 2023, the Council of State recognized the existence of the practice of discriminatory identity checks, stating that it was “not limited to isolated cases,” that it constituted “a blatant disregard of the prohibition on discriminatory practices” and that racial profiling had harmful impacts on affected persons.⁷ The judgment fell short, however, of recognizing the systemic nature of racial profiling and failed to order the state to adopt the necessary measures to end it.

³ Court of Cassation, press release, “Contrôles d’identité discriminatoires (09.11.16),” <https://www.courdecassation.fr/toutes-les-actualites/2016/11/09/contrôles-didentite-discriminatoires> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁴ Defender of Rights, “Survey on access to rights, Volume 1, Police/population relations: the case of identity checks” (“Enquête sur l’accès aux droits, Volume 1 — Relations police / population : le cas des contrôles d’identité”), January 2017, https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/2023-10/ddd_etude_Enquete-acces-aux-droits-volume1_relations-police-population_20170111.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁵ Defender of Rights, “Police/population relations Identity Checks and Filing of Complaints” (“Relations police/population : contrôles d’identité et dépôts de plainte”), 2nd edition, Vol. 1, June 2025, https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/2025-06/ddd_EAD-2024_volume-1_relations-police-population.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 15.

⁶ “France: Class Action Lawsuit against Ethnic Profiling—Civil Society Organizations File Case with Council of State over Systemic Racial Discrimination,” Human Rights Watch news release, July 22, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/07/22/france-class-action-lawsuit-against-ethnic-profiling>.

⁷ Council of State, Assembly, *Association Amnesty International France and others*, Case No. 454836, October 11, 2023, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/ceta/id/CETATEXT000048197376> (accessed May 29, 2026).

In December 2023, the Court of Audit (*Cour des comptes*) released a report detailing significant procedural violations related to police identity checks, including lack of oversight.⁸ The Defender of Rights had requested this investigation because of widely shared concerns that identity checks were not recorded, which effectively placed police beyond scrutiny. The report confirmed the large scale of identity checks, estimating that police had carried out close to 47 million checks over the course of 2021—an average of 128,767 checks per day.

In June 2025, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in the case *Seydi and Others v. France* that three identity checks targeting a French citizen of North African descent over the course of ten days amounted to racial discrimination in violation of France’s obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights.⁹

International human rights bodies have consistently expressed alarm over discriminatory police practices in France. For instance, following the 2023 police killing of a 17-year-old French teenager of North African descent, Nahel Merzouk, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressed its deep concern over continuing practices of racial profiling by French police, including identity checks, discriminatory stops, use of racist language, and excessive use of force. It recommended that the French authorities “address as a matter of priority the structural and systemic causes of racial discrimination including in law enforcement, in particular in the police.”¹⁰

Despite repeated judicial scrutiny and condemnation and scrutiny from national, regional, and international rights organizations, the French state has failed to take action to end discriminatory police practices and continues to deny their systemic nature.

Extending Police Powers to Issue On-the-Spot Fines for Minor Offenses

From 2012, police were gradually given new, unfettered powers to punish public disturbance offenses on the spot. These powers bypass basic protections under criminal

⁸ Court of Audit, “Identity Checks—A widespread practice with undefined aims” (“Les contrôles d’identité : Une pratique généralisée aux finalités à préciser”), thematic report, December 6, 2023, https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2023-12/20231206_controles-identite.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 10.

⁹ European Court of Human Rights, *Seydi and Others v. France*, (no. 35844/17), judgment of June 26, 2025, available at www.echr.coe.int.

¹⁰ CERD, Statement on France, July 7, 2023.

procedural law that guarantee persons have meaningful judicial recourse to defend themselves against criminal accusations and ultimately sanctions. They have compounded the existing problems with discriminatory policing practices against Black and Arab boys and young men.

Fixed penalty fines (“fines”) are designed as criminal penalties to be issued by police if and when they observe the commission of certain listed offenses. The fixed amount depends on the classification of an offense. For minor offenses, it can range between €11 and €135, which increases upon non-payment to between €35 and €375.

Initially introduced in 1926 to sanction traffic code violations, the number of offenses subject to on-the-spot fines has grown exponentially since 2010. In 2012, they were extended to the minor offense (*infraction contraventionnelle*) of noise nuisance and in 2015, to littering and illegally discharging unsanitary liquids in public spaces.¹¹ In 2016, controversial legal amendments, purporting to modernize the justice system, extended the application of fines to certain misdemeanors (*infractions délictuelles*), such as drug-related offenses and unlawful occupation of buildings or land.¹² French President Emmanuel Macron hailed the amendments because they “hit where it really hurts, which is the wallet—excuse my bluntness.”¹³

The government justified the overhaul of fines procedures as relieving an overburdened and under-resourced criminal justice system. The amendments entrusted the police with

¹¹ Décret n° 2012-343 du 9 mars 2012, modifiant l'article R.48-1 du Code de procédure pénale, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000025468280> (accessed May 29, 2026); Décret n° 2015-337 du 25 mars 2015 relatif à l'abandon d'ordures et autres objets, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/download/pdf?id=MT7GEnWFPEY3oDROpy8gbhis7QpKRrPjLkXtX-kSmY=> (accessed May 29, 2026); and Décret n° 2020-1573 du 11 décembre 2020 portant diverses dispositions d'adaptation et de simplification dans le domaine de la prévention et de la gestion des déchets, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/eli/decret/2020/12/11/TREP2018387D/jo/texte> (accessed May 29, 2026).

¹² Loi n° 2016-1547 du 18 novembre 2016 de modernisation de la justice du XXI^e siècle (1), <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000033418805> (accessed May 29, 2026). A further law extended the list to 85 further offenses, including petty theft: Loi n° 2023-22 du 24 janvier 2023 d'orientation et de programmation du ministère de l'intérieur, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000047046768> (accessed May 29, 2026).

¹³ Interior Ministry, “Clôture du Beauvau de la sécurité par le président de la République,” news release, September 15, 2021, <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/actualites/grands-dossiers/beauvau-de-securite/cloture-du-beauvau-de-securite-par-president-de> (accessed May 29, 2026).

adjudication powers “normally reserved for magistrates,”¹⁴ while individuals saw their due process rights sacrificed for reasons of efficiency.¹⁵

These amendments created new, largely unchecked, tools ripe for racial profiling that entrench a lack of protection of rights and recourse to remedies for affected people.

Growing National Concern over Discriminatory Police Fining Practices

Since 2017, MCDS has observed a rapidly growing number of racialized boys and young men, already routinely subjected to discriminatory police identity checks, start to receive fines, often by the same police officers patrolling their neighborhoods, for alleged public disturbance offenses that they claim they had not committed. For some, dozens of fines eventually generated fine debt of up to tens of thousands of euros. Mothers came to MCDS to seek assistance because they could not afford to pay their sons’ mounting debt. In the following years, cases rapidly accumulated.

An academic study in 2022 scrutinized police’s implementation of fines between 2018 and 2022 in Paris and the nearby municipality of Argenteuil.¹⁶ The study called police’s use of multiple fines a “weapon of law,” highlighting procedural concerns and the considerable socio-economic impacts for young people from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, fines were used to punish violations of Covid-19 health measures, such as lockdowns.¹⁷ Official statistics revealed disproportionately high rates of pandemic-related fines in working-class neighborhoods with large percentages of persons perceived as Black, Arab or North African. For instance, the rate in Seine-Saint-Denis, a

¹⁴ “Fines, Evictions and ID Checks: How Police Target the ‘Undesirables’.” An interview with Magda Boutros and Aline Daillère,” *Index*, interview, May 30, 2025, <https://www.index.ngo/eclairages/controle-police-indesirables-defenseur-droits/> (accessed May 29, 2026).

¹⁵ Chapter III will explore impacts on procedural rights.

¹⁶ Aline Daillère, “The fixed penalty notice, a weapon of (non-)law,” *Champ pénal/Penal field*, *Open Edition Journals*, Vol. 26 (2022), published online on December 21, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4000/champpenal.14012> (accessed May 29, 2026).

¹⁷ Émilie Biland, Cyrine Gardes, Jérôme Pélisse, “Financial repression of protests in France. Pandemic mobilizations, from the street to the courtroom” (“La répression financière des manifestations en France. Mobilisations pandémiques, de la rue au tribunal”), *Déviante et Société*, Vol. 48 (2024), <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-deviance-et-societe-2024-4-page-443?lang=fr> (accessed May 29, 2026), pp. 443-474, DOI: 10.3917/ds.484.0443.

department adjacent to Paris, was three times the national average.¹⁸ A study by the Defender of Rights found racialized young people in Paris were 140 times more likely to receive such fines than the rest of the population of the capital region of Île-de-France.¹⁹

In 2022, Reuters published official data on pandemic-related fines issued in Épinay-Sous-Sénart, a commune in the southern suburbs of Paris, showing that 80 percent of lockdown fines in the area were concentrated “in two adjacent neighborhoods where residents say many ethnic minority families live. ... The vast majority of the people fined had Arab or African surnames.”²⁰

Those interviewed in the Reuters report were part of a group of 32 residents in Épinay-Sous-Sénart who sought to challenge their lockdown-related fines before the Defender of Rights.²¹ (RE)CLAIM examined the complaint file, which included 153 fines in total, and found that in 152 cases, individuals stated that they had no contact with police when the fines had been issued. In many cases, the complainants attested in sworn affidavits that they had authorization to be outside in conformity with lockdown regulations, but officers had not checked their affidavits. In some cases, they noted that they were not even present at the location of the alleged offense. At time of writing, the case was still pending before the Defender of Rights.

As reports accumulated that young people targeted with numerous fines for public disturbance offenses also received numerous pandemic-related fines, MCDS, Human

¹⁸ Emmanuel Fansten, “Balance sheet Lockdown: in Seine-Saint-Denis, the rate of fines issued is three times higher than elsewhere” (“Bilan Confinement : en Seine-Saint-Denis, un taux de verbalisation trois fois plus important qu'ailleurs”), *Libération*, April 26, 2020, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2020/04/26/confinement-en-seine-saint-denis-un-taux-de-verbalisation-trois-fois-plus-important-qu-ailleurs_1786462/?redirected=1 (accessed May 29, 2026). Interior Ministry, “Info rapide n°45 - 2,7 millions d'infractions liées au Covid-19 enregistrées durant l'état d'urgence sanitaire entre mars 2020 et juillet 2022,” November 2022, <https://mobile.interieur.gouv.fr/content/download/137329/1086196/file/Info%20Rapide%2045.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2026), pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ Aline Daillère, Magda Boutros, “Amendes, évictions, contrôles : la gestion des “indésirables” par la police en région parisienne” study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/2025-04/ddd_eclairages_amendes-evictions-controles_gestion-des-indesirables_20250327.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 14.

²⁰ Layli Foroudi, “In France, minority communities decry a surge in police fines,” *Reuters*, December 7, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/france-minority-communities-decry-surge-police-fines-2022-12-06/> (accessed May 29, 2026).

²¹ “The Justice Initiative Supports French Youth in Complaint Against Wrongful Lockdown Fines,” Open Society Justice Initiative news release, December 9, 2021, <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/newsroom/the-justice-initiative-supports-french-youth-in-complaint-against-wrongful-lockdown-fines> (accessed May 29, 2026).

Rights Watch, and other groups called on the authorities in 2020 to end discriminatory police practices.²² The Defender of Rights observed that this disproportionate targeting of police during the pandemic had “considerably” increased affected youth’s fine debt.²³

In February 2021, the French National Consultative Commission on Human Rights (*Commission nationale consultative des droits de l’homme*, CNCDH), France’s national human rights institution, alerted the authorities that police were misusing their fining powers “against certain categories of the population, with the aim of excluding them from public space or intimidating them,” and that numerous fines for public disturbance offenses had resulted in tens of thousands of euros in debt for young people.²⁴

In May 2023, the Defender of Rights spoke about a “growing problem, known as multiple or repeat fines,” with people receiving “several simultaneous fine notices ... at a single occasion (up to 8) ... [for] mainly offenses relating to public disturbance offenses or road traffic violations.”²⁵ Having received several complaints of rights violations ensuing from fines which appear to target certain parts of the population and specific neighborhoods, the Defender of Rights urged the government “to establish a map of the locations of multiple fines (particularly during lockdown) especially for minor offenses” and to heed its earlier recommendation to develop an exemption from fines for people in “a situation of economic and/or social vulnerability.”²⁶ The government has so far failed to take steps to end discriminatory police fining practices.

²² “The French authorities should urgently take concrete measures to end discriminatory police checks and fines,” Human Rights Watch Open Letter to the government of France, May 13, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/05/france_letter_may_13.pdf.

²³ Study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, p. 14.

²⁴ CNCDH, “Avis sur les rapports entre police et population : rétablir la confiance entre la police et la population,” (opinion no. A-2023-2), February 11, 2021, <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000043163337> (accessed May 29, 2026), para. 38.

²⁵ Defender of Rights, *Décision-cadre n° 2023-030 du 30 mai 2023 recommandant de mettre fin à la procédure de l’amende forfaitaire délictuelle*, framework decision, May 30, 2023, https://juridique.defenseurdesdroits.fr/index.php?lvl=notice_display&id=47513&opac_view=-1 (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

II. Discriminatory and Abusive Fines

This report focuses on police’s use in working-class neighborhoods of fines that seek to sanction three public disturbance offenses:

1. “discharging unsanitary liquids outside of authorized areas” (*déversement de liquide insalubre hors des emplacements autorisés*);²⁷
2. “depositing or abandoning garbage, waste, materials, or objects outside of authorized area” (*dépôt ou abandon d’ordures, de déchets, de matériaux ou d’objets hors des emplacements autorisés*);²⁸ and
3. “nighttime noise disturbing the peace” (*bruit ou tapage nocturne troublant la tranquillité d’autrui*) or “daytime noise disturbing the peace” (*bruit ou tapage injurieux troublant la tranquillité d’autrui*).²⁹

Police officers at the center of allegations mainly belong to the French National Police’s Specialized Territorial Units (*Brigades Spécialisées de Terrain*, BST) or Territorial Contact Units (*Brigades Territoriales de Contact*, BTC).³⁰ These units are tasked with combatting crime through “territorial occupation” (*occupation de terrain*), that is, daily patrols of specific locations.³¹ Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy introduced BST units in August 2010 to signal a shift in community policing from an allegedly “soft” approach to a

²⁷ Before December 14, 2020: as provided for by art. R. 633-6 of the Criminal Code (repealed), art. R.541-76 of the Environmental Code (amended) and punishable by art. R. 633-6 of the Criminal Code (repealed); and since December 14, 2020: as provided for by art. R.634-2 of the Criminal Code (in force), art. R.541-76-1 of the Environmental Code (in force) and punishable by art. R.634-2 of the Criminal Code (in force).

²⁸ Between March 28, 2015, and December 14, 2020: as provided for by art. R. 633-6 of the Criminal Code (repealed), and punishable by art. R. 633-6 of the Criminal Code (repealed); and since December 14, 2020: as provided for by art. R. 634-2 of the Criminal Code (in force), and punishable by art. R. 634-2 of the Criminal Code (in force).

²⁹ As defined by art. R 623-2, paras. 1 and 2 of the Criminal Code: nighttime noise or disturbances disrupting the peace of others, daytime disturbances, noise, or offensive gatherings disrupting the peace of residents, and daytime disturbances disrupting the peace of residents; and as defined by art. R1336-5 7 of the Public Health Code and punishable under art. R1337-7 of the Public Health Code: noise emissions that disturb the peace of the neighborhood or harm human health, and daytime disturbances disrupting the peace of residents.

³⁰ BTC units replaced BST units in the Paris area. See Police Prefecture, “Paris Police Prefecture: Missions and Responsibilities,” report, October 2021, https://www.prefecturedepolice.interieur.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/Documents/plaquette_presentation_pp_2021.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 6.

³¹ Marie Morelle, “The making of police territories. Professional practices under debate in a municipality in the Île-de-France region” (“La fabrique de territoires policiers. Des pratiques professionnelles en débat dans une commune francilienne”), *Droit et société*, Vol. 3, no. 97 (2017), <https://droit.cairn.info/revue-droit-et-societe-2017-3-page-469?lang=fr> (accessed May 29, 2026). DOI: 10.3917/drs.097.0469.

more aggressive one.³² Units are deployed to so-called sensitive urban areas, which the government deems to have higher crime levels, and refers to as “districts of republican reconquest” (*quartiers de reconquête républicaine*) signaling a reassertion of the authority of the state.³³ The research carried out for this report included but was not confined to these areas. In some locations, persons interviewed indicated that municipal police officers had also issued fines for these public disturbance offenses.

Sanctioning “Undesirable” Presence in Public Spaces

We are not bothering anyone, we’re just playing soccer, peacefully. Some young people are relaxing on the sidelines, watching the game. Everyone gets a fine. Twenty police officers come [and] surround us.

–David, 19, Paris, February 2025

The police arrived and checked our IDs.... Afterwards, the officers said: “We are going to fine all of you.” We were just hanging out in the park. We got fines for noise disturbance. [This is] gratuitous ... harassment.

–Malik, 22, Saint-Denis, April 2025

Interviews with twenty young men, 18 years and older at time of being interviewed, reported to us that they received their first fines when they were children, often around the age of 15 and 16.³⁴ One young man estimated he started receiving his first fines when he was 13 years old.³⁵ All young men come from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods and experienced daily routine identity checks in their neighborhoods from as young as 10 years old.

³² See Interior Ministry, “Brice Hortefeux creates a new generation UTeQ: the specialized field brigade” (“Brice Hortefeux crée une UTeQ nouvelle génération : la brigade spécialisée de terrain”), news release, August 17, 2010, <https://www.interieur.gouv.fr/archive/brice-hortefeux-cree-une-uteq-nouvelle-generation-la-brigade-specialisee-de-terrain> (accessed May 29, 2026); and Pierre Alonso, “Specialized field brigade, a unit not there to talk” (“Analyse Brigade spécialisée de terrain, une unité pas là pour discuter”), *Libération*, February 17, 2017, https://www.liberation.fr/france/2017/02/09/brigade-specialisee-de-terrain-une-unite-pas-la-pour-discuter_1547529/ (accessed May 29, 2026).

³³ Court of Audit, “Observations définitives sur l’efficacité des forces de sécurité intérieure dans les quartiers de reconquête républicaine (QRR),” report, April 2023, <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2023-10/20230426-S2023-0248-1-Quartiers-reconquete-republicaine-rep-SGMIOM.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 3.

³⁴ We spoke to 21 racialized young directly impacted people, of whom one was an unhoused woman. While her experiences showed similar traits to those of the young men, the abuses she experienced were particularly tied to her life circumstances.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

The circumstances the young men described in which they received fines were ordinary daily activities, especially for children: walking outside with friends; socializing in a neighborhood park; standing in front of a friend’s home or a school; or playing football or basketball with friends, including sitting on the sidelines watching others play.

Mohammed, 24, recalled that police fined him and a small group of his friends when they were sitting peacefully on benches in a small neighborhood park city hall had installed to provide communal space for residents. “It was summer, around 4 p.m., we were just relaxing—it was the holidays—then police came, gave us all fines [for noise nuisance] and left,” he said.³⁶ Like Mohammed, David, 19, did not understand why police issued fines for using communal public spaces when the authorities had created these spaces to be used.³⁷

Nema and Monia, two mothers of sons who had received numerous fines, told us that the local authorities had removed benches in neighborhood parks “where children had gathered to laugh and talk” to reduce public spaces where young people could socialize.³⁸

Monia also noted that:

Not all young people can afford to go to a restaurant or cafe to hang out with friends. When they see each other, they meet outside. We live in social housing. There are six of us in a two-bedroom apartment. I’m not going to tell my son, ‘Bring home four or five friends.’ So they go out to hang out.

Omer, a municipal police officer and father of a boy who was fined, said it seemed that “young people don’t have the right to live their lives, to socialize in public.”³⁹ He noted that police play a “cat and mouse game” with them as soon as they gather in a neighborhood park. When his son started receiving fines, he instructed him: “As soon as you see the police, you leave the park. Don’t go outside.” He said his son’s friends continued to receive fines, but his son did not, because he left before police arrived.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Mohammed (anonymized), Essonne department, January 21, 2026.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nema (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025. Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Monia (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

³⁹ (RE)CLAIM interview with Omer (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

The fines they most commonly received were for allegedly committing public disturbance offenses: daytime and nighttime noise nuisances, illegally discharging unsanitary liquids, and littering.

Most often the young men said that they received fines when they were in groups and close to their homes.

In 2022, based on complaints received, the Defender of Rights already observed that “almost exclusively ... young men (under 25), sometimes minors perceived as foreigners” were impacted by repeated fines for public disturbance offenses “within a limited geographical area around their home, often by the same officers.”⁴⁰

In 2025, the Defender of Rights published an extensive study examining police’s use of identity checks and fines, finding that they served as tools to implement an “institutional policy of ‘evicting’ populations labeled as ‘undesirable’” from public spaces.⁴¹ Police records revealed that affected population groups were defined as “undesirables” based on their ethnicity or race and/or socio-economic status.⁴²

A police officer in the Paris area with whom we spoke during the course of this research confirmed that police regularly use the label of “undesirables” to log identity checks and fines.⁴³

In a parliamentary session in February 2026, questions from the opposition regarding fines prompted French Interior Minister Laurent Nuñez to acknowledge that police reports had used the label of “undesirables.”⁴⁴ While stating he would stop its further use, he denied

⁴⁰ Defender of Rights, Avis no. 22-02 du 3 octobre 2022 relatif au projet de loi d'orientation et de programmation du ministère de l'intérieur, https://juridique.defenseurdesdroits.fr/doc_num.php?explnum_id=21467 (accessed May 29, 2026), pp. 4-5.

⁴¹ Aline Daillère, Magda Boutros, “Amendes, évictions, contrôles : la gestion des “indésirables” par la police en région parisienne” study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, https://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/sites/default/files/2025-04/ddd_eclairages_amendes-evictions-contrroles_gestion-des-indesirables_20250327.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 7.

⁴² Ibid., p. 10.

⁴³ (RE)CLAIM interview with Alex, police officer, Paris, October 15, 2025.

⁴⁴ French National Assembly, “Questions au gouvernement/Mercredi 11 février 2026,” video portal, February 11, 2026, https://videos.assemblee-nationale.fr/video.18279491_698cd853a5975.questions-au-gouvernement---mercredi-11-fevrier-2026-11-fevrier-2026 (accessed May 29, 2026).

the existence of discriminatory identity checks and claimed fines were never issued unless an offense had been committed.

The designation of “undesirable” does not have a legal basis. In fact, French law prohibits discrimination on the basis of origin or socio-economic status. The term, however, carries a long and documented history in France. It was used throughout the 20th century to exclude and repress various racialized groups from public spaces and overall society, including Traveller communities,⁴⁵ Jewish people, and French Algerians.⁴⁶

Young men expressed to us that they experienced these fines as a form of punishment simply for who they are and for being in public spaces.

Grégoire, a social worker, told us that the “young people admit that they can create noise but not all the time.”⁴⁷ He described constant police harassment, regardless of the time of day, what young people were doing, and the context. He said:

The police make regular rounds around the neighborhood. I don't think there's a day when they don't come by the spots where young people hang out. The police allege there are always complaints from neighbors. We know there are sometimes complaints. Complaints would tend to be in the evening, but during the day [too] young people get fines...

Abdoul, 18, told us that police had threatened to ruin his and his friends' lives with fines.⁴⁸ Issa, 18, said he knew that police were using fines to punish him and his friends because police officers had told them so.⁴⁹ The police said: “We will fine you every day until you reimburse us for the burning public buses,” referring to an incident of urban violence in the outskirts of Lyon. Issa told the officers that he and his friends had nothing to do with it.

⁴⁵ “Travellers: eternally undesirable?” (“Gens du voyage : éternels indésirables ?”), Radio France, June 17, 2023, <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/sous-les-radars/gens-du-voyage-eternels-indesirables-1531275> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Blanchard, “The ‘undesirables,’ Past and present of a category of public action” (“Les ‘indésirables’. Passé et présent d'une catégorie d'action publique”), in: *GISTI: Figures de l'étranger, quelles représentations pour quelles politiques ?* (2013), pp. 16-26; and Magda Boutros, “The police and the undesirables,” *La Vie des Idées*, September 14, 2018, <https://laviedesidees.fr/La-police-et-les-indesirables.html#nh8> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

⁴⁸ (RE)CLAIM interview with Abdoul (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

⁴⁹ (RE)CLAIM interview with Issa (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

Media reports also showed that the suspects had been arrested at the time Issa said he was told this.⁵⁰

Laure, another social worker, said she considered the police’s use of fines was embedded in “racism against Arabs and Black people.”⁵¹ She described the way that police issued fines as “relentless.” Two other social workers said they see fines as a tool to render racialized youth invisible in public spaces.⁵²

Multiple Fines

They [the police] saw me walk by and issued a fine. They didn’t check my ID. Then they came back, checked me, gave me another fine, and then left again, and [came back and] gave me yet another fine. Just five minutes apart each time. I was just walking down the street. They [the fines] were for noise and littering.

—Faysal, 20, Essonne department, May 2025

All young men we spoke to had received numerous, often dozens, of fines for alleged public disturbance offenses. Police sometimes issued multiple fines simultaneously or minutes or hours apart. Fine debt records showed that some young men received several fines per week. Social workers explained that young people received fines “every day.”⁵³

Young men and social workers told us that, in most cases, police officers appeared to know young people’s names and personal details from regular identity checks since their early childhood. This reflects the Defender of Rights’ findings in its 2025 study.⁵⁴

Due to the sheer number of fines that young people received over the years dating back to childhood, while they knew that they had received many fines, they did not always know or

⁵⁰ “Second night of violence in Rillieux: two TCL buses set on fire, a police officer injured” (“Deuxième soirée de violences à Rillieux : deux bus TCL incendiés, un policier blessé”), *Le Progrès*, November 1, 2024, <https://www.leprogres.fr/faits-divers-justice/2024/11/01/deuxieme-soiree-de-violences-a-rillieux-deux-bus-tcl-incendies-un-policier-blesse> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Laure (anonymized), social worker, April 2, 2025.

⁵² Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Laure (anonymized), Essonne department, April 2, 2025; Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

⁵⁴ Study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, p. 15.

remember for which offenses.⁵⁵ Not all young men had requested fine debt records from the authorities.

When we spoke to Nema, a mother of three sons, she brought a large bag with her sons' fine notices, which covered an entire kitchen table, to illustrate how many fines her sons had received in bulk over the years. She said:

The fines of my children ... I don't even want to look at the fine notices anymore. ... If I add them all up, there's some €30,000 in debt. How can I, a single mother living alone, deal with this? I can't even begin to describe the stress. I don't sleep.⁵⁶

Nadège, a mother, told us she was exhausted because her son, who was still under the age of 18, had received numerous fines throughout his childhood. She said that there was not a day that went by without a fine notice arriving in her mailbox.⁵⁷ Fatou, a mother of six boys, shared those sentiments.

We get letters almost every day. When I open the mail in the morning, I no longer look at the fine notices because every time, there are three or four for each child. I just put them aside because there's nothing I can do.⁵⁸

When Faysal was 16 years old, he received five fines at one time, which, after penalty increases for non-payment, added up to a total of €1,680.⁵⁹ His fine debt record showed that his total debt for 25 fines totaled nearly €8,000 in the following three years.

Hassan and Kim recalled receiving at least six or more fines at once.⁶⁰ Kim's fine record showed that he received fines every few days over the course of months.

⁵⁵ This was confirmed in interviews with social workers.

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nema (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nadège (anonymized), Saint-Denis, June 11, 2025.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Fatou (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM checked his fine debt records.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM online interview with Hassan (anonymized), Essonne department, July 21, 2025, and Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Kim (anonymized), Essonne department, May 5, 2025.

Djibril told us that he regularly received three fines a few hours apart.

It can happen that I receive three fines in one day. Sometimes, the fines are issued a few hours apart. At 1 p.m., the police say: “Oh, you shouted.” They come back at 6 p.m., they give me another fine.⁶¹

Another young man showed us his fine debt record, which listed numerous occasions where he received two to three fines in a day over the course of months.⁶² Where young people received several fines at once or within a day, their fine debt quickly accumulates.

Fines Issued without Police Contact

All the fines I received [during Covid] were issued using CCTV cameras. The cameras were misused. There wasn’t even a physical ID check so the officer could first check my identity and then check my certificate [attesting permission to leave the house during lockdowns].

–Hassan, 29, Essonne department, July 2025

During the Covid-19 pandemic, evidence showed that police officers frequently issued fines for alleged breaches of public health measures remotely with no interaction with sanctioned persons.⁶³ Although the number of fines issued remotely increased when pandemic control restrictions were in place, the practice itself was not new. Independent national rights institutions, which had already raised concerns about remotely issued fines in response to reports before the pandemic, continue to express concern about an apparent normalization of this practice to sanction public disturbance offenses.⁶⁴

Remotely issued fines entail circumstances where police issued fines when driving or walking by or using CCTV video surveillance without any contact between the police officer and the person fined, including checking their identity or during the Covid-19 pandemic, checking certificates that allowed persons to leave their house during lockdowns.

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Djibril (anonymized), Essonne department, July 8, 2025.

⁶² Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Benjamin (anonymized), Saint-Denis, May 3, 2025.

⁶³ See Reuters investigative report and collective complaint in Chapter I.

⁶⁴ CNCDH, Opinion no. A-2023-2 of February 2021, para. 40; and Defender of Rights, Opinion no. 22-02 of October 2022, p. 5.

The law does not provide a legal basis for the use of CCTV video surveillance to issue fines for noise nuisances and illegal discharge of liquids. The law does stipulate that certain littering involving a vehicle is illegal, and video surveillance can be used as the basis for issuing a fine, but does not specify whether such offenses are only punishable involving a vehicle.⁶⁵

Kim spoke to us about several fines he received that he claimed police appeared to have issued when walking past him without any interaction, including checking his ID: “When I received the fine notices, I realized police didn’t check my identity at that time and didn’t tell me I was being fined.”⁶⁶ Benjamin made similar claims for three fines he received.⁶⁷ Social workers explained that police sometimes issued fines to young people they apparently recognized from identity checks, as they drove by in their police cars.⁶⁸

Young men and social workers suspect that police were able to issue fines remotely because officers stored young people’s personal details, which they gathered during police identity checks in the neighborhood, in their phones or tablets.

“The police know us ... our names, addresses, mothers, friends, little brothers ...,” Malik explained.⁶⁹ Djibril said that police “no longer need to ask me for my ID, and if they do, they already know it by heart.”⁷⁰ Similarly, Benjamin reported that police “would drive by, shout my name, and I know the next day or two, I would get a fine.”⁷¹ Abdoul said officers

⁶⁵ Article L. 251-2a. 11 of the Code of Internal Security (*Code de la sécurité intérieure*) authorizes video surveillance for the “prevention and detection of offenses relating to the abandonment of litter, waste, materials, or other objects.” Ministerial responses to parliamentary questions in the Senate in 2020, 2024, 2025 address only instances of littering involving a vehicle (articles R. 635-8 of the Criminal Code and R. 541-77 of the Environmental Code), which constitute the only case in which liability may be applied (article R. 121-6 of the Highway Code). Issuance of fines via video surveillance to punish littering without a vehicle (article R. 633-6 of the Criminal Code) remains unregulated, with a court still having to rule on this matter. See parliamentary sessions in 2020, 2024 and 2025, available at <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2020/qSEQ200214225.html> (accessed May 29, 2026), <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2023/qSEQ230506756.html> (accessed May 29, 2026), <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2024/qSEQ241202694.html> (accessed May 29, 2026), and <https://www.senat.fr/questions/base/2025/qSEQ250102755.html> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Kim (anonymized), Essonne department, May 5, 2025.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Benjamin (anonymized), Saint-Denis, May 3, 2025.

⁶⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM, and MCDS interview with Malik (anonymized), Saint-Denis, April 5, 2025.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Djibril (anonymized), Essonne department, July 8, 2025.

⁷¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Benjamin (anonymized), Saint-Denis, May 3, 2025.

also told him he had seen that they stored people’s photos in their phones to recognize them on the street.⁷²

On May 5, 2020, in a letter addressed to mayors in the Department of Essonne, a public prosecutor stressed that fines “can only be issued after direct contact with the person.... They cannot be issued by identifying an offender in a group without interacting with them.”⁷³ She added that “issuing fines remotely, sometimes successively, without the express knowledge of the offenders, was unlawful....”⁷⁴ (RE)CLAIM received and examined a copy of the letter.

Police officers’ re-purposing of youth’s personal data collected through identity checks raises serious privacy and data protection concerns, as well as whether there is a lawful basis for doing so.⁷⁵

The Defender of Rights’ 2025 study connected the phenomenon of remotely issued fines to the “widespread use of electronic fine notices in the mid-2010s [which] has also encouraged this practice.”⁷⁶

Issuing fines without interaction with the persons fined makes it easier for police to issue fines erroneously or to fabricate fines. It also makes it difficult, if not impossible, for those fined to know they have been fined and to gather evidence to prove their innocence.

⁷² (RE)CLAIM interview with Abdoul (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

⁷³ Camille Polloni and David Perrotin, “In Essonne, a case of ‘discriminatory harassment’ through fines,” (“Dans l’Essonne, un « harcèlement discriminatoire » par amendes interposées”), *Mediapart*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/091221/dans-l-essonne-un-harcèlement-discriminatoire-par-amendes-interposees> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Relevant laws include the EU Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016; the EU Law Enforcement Directive 2016/680 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016; and Loi n° 78-17 du 6 janvier 1978 relative à l’informatique, aux fichiers et aux libertés.

⁷⁶ Study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, p. 15.

Fines Based on Fabricated Offenses

One time I was in Tunisia and I received a fine. I'm not even here and they're issuing unjust fines. I have proof of a plane ticket and [passport] stamps.

—Issa, 18, Lyon, July 2025

Young men, parents, and social workers we spoke to reported that police issued fines based on fabricated offenses that young people deny they committed, including cases where they could not have been present at the time and place of the alleged offenses.

Nadège described how her son was fined for offenses in their neighborhood despite being out of town at his grandfather's house.⁷⁷ She and others we spoke to called fines for offenses that young people did not commit “gratuitous fines.”

Manon, another mother, also spoke about her son's three fines for fabricated offenses while he was hospitalized for three months and partially in a coma.⁷⁸ Saida, also a mother, told us that her son had received fines at a time when he was on a plane.⁷⁹

Nema spoke about one of her youngest son's fines for a fabricated noise nuisance, when police alleged he had disturbed the neighborhood peace by allegedly making too much noise with friends in front of his friends' school at around 4 p.m.⁸⁰

The Defender of Rights' 2025 study, examining police incident reports, found that police regularly evicted “undesirables” regardless of their behavior, that is, “without observing any criminal or disorderly behavior.”⁸¹

Two court decisions in 2025 found police officers guilty for fabricating offenses that resulted in numerous fines for young people.

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nadège (anonymized), Saint-Denis, June 11, 2025.

⁷⁸ (RE)CLAIM interview with Marion (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025. (RE)CLIM also verified hospital records.

⁷⁹ (RE)CLAIM interview with Saida (anonymized), Lyon, April 1, 2026.

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nema (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

⁸¹ Study published by the Defender of Rights in April 2025, p. 11.

In 2025, a court in Tarascon, in the south of France, convicted two police officers of forgery for issuing fabricated fines remotely and forging the victims' signatures.⁸² The officers had taken photographs of young people's IDs during identity checks, stored the data in their personal phones and then used it (including signatures) to issue fabricated fines.⁸³ One of the affected young men started receiving fines—including seven simultaneous ones—for noise nuisances and littering without having had any contact with an officer.⁸⁴

The same year, a court in Nanterre, in the Paris region, also convicted a police officer of forgery for fabricating several fines against a 16-year-old boy, whose phone location data proved that he could not have committed the alleged offenses.⁸⁵

Young men and parents spoke of the fabricated nature of fines also when they described instances where boys and young men received simultaneous fines for all or most of the three public disturbance offenses.

Adam said that police officers had simultaneously punished him for a daytime and nighttime noise nuisance in the afternoon, which was practically impossible.⁸⁶

Djibril recalled police fabricating offenses that resulted in simultaneous fines:

Police said that I was being noisy when I wasn't, that I spat on the ground when I didn't, that I threw a cigarette on the ground when they didn't see me throw one away. Once, they checked my ID [while] I was holding a can.

⁸² Melanie Philips, "The punishment had to be severe," two years in prison for one of the four police officers who handed out fake fines" ("La sanction devait être marquée", deux ans de prison pour l'un des quatre policiers qui distribuèrent des fausses amendes"), *France Télévisions*, April 5, 2025, <https://france3-regions.franceinfo.fr/provence-alpes-cote-d-azur/bouches-du-rhone/arles/la-sanction-devait-etre-marquee-deux-ans-de-prison-pour-l-un-des-quatre-policiers-qui-distribuaient-des-fausses-amendes-3134149.html> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁸³ On April 18, 2025, (RE)CLAIM conducted an interview with the lawyer representing one of the victims, who told them that the chief of the national police district raised these practices with the local prosecutor following victims' repeat appeals and allegations of forgery as well as that internal tension inside the police unit seemed to have contributed to the investigation's success.

⁸⁴ (RE)CLAIM interview with lawyer representing one of victims, April 18, 2025.

⁸⁵ David Livios, "False police report in Suresnes: the police officer sentenced to a permanent ban from practicing" ("Faux PV à Suresnes : le policier condamné à une interdiction définitive d'exercer"), *Le Parisien*, May 2, 2025, <https://www.leparisien.fr/hauts-de-seine-92/faux-pv-a-suresnes-le-policier-condamne-a-une-interdiction-definitive-dexercer-02-05-2025-BP7QNHRLRQFFGHF3XCZOKCD4KAM.php> (accessed May 29, 2026).

⁸⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Adam (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

They ordered me to put it on the ground. Then they said, ‘Now you’ll get a fine’ [for littering], just to show they had control over me.⁸⁷

Ryan, 19, equally alleged that police had fabricated offenses that resulted in several public disturbance fines against him and his friends.

One day, we were going to a restaurant and police crossed our path. They put us to one side; they told us we were making noise and some neighbors called them to complain ... [Then] the police saw garbage on the ground and claimed it was ours. A week later, we received a fine notice in our mailboxes [for noise nuisance and litter].⁸⁸

Omer, speaking as a father and police officer, used the term “magic trio” (*triple magique*) when describing simultaneous fabricated fines for all three public disturbance offenses.⁸⁹ He described circumstances similar to Ryan’s account, saying that police officers simply pointed to litter on the ground, claiming that young people dropped it there. He said, officers would threaten youth with: “We’re going to come every day to check on you and fine you as long as you’re here.” He called this “harassment” and “abuse of power” toward children.

Malik suggested that police issued fabricated offenses to overwhelm racialized young people in his neighborhood with fine debt.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Djibril (anonymized), Essonne department, July 8, 2025.

⁸⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Ryan (anonymized), Essonne department, May 5, 2025.

⁸⁹ (RE)CLAIM interview with Omer (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

⁹⁰ Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM and MCDS interview with Malik (anonymized), Saint-Denis, April 5, 2025.

III. Expansive Police Powers Undermine Procedural Safeguards

A series of amendments to the law adopted since 2012 grant police broad powers and discretion to determine persons' guilt of minor public disturbance offenses "on the spot." This effectively transfers judicial responsibilities to the police in a manner that undermines fair trial rights of persons facing criminal penalties and their right to an effective remedy. The three public disturbance offenses discussed in this report are deemed criminal offenses under French law.

Three assumptions underlie these changes in law: that police officers exercise their powers fairly and equitably, without discrimination; that assessments of the commission of these offenses are a straightforward matter, leaving no room for abuse or error; and that fines have only minor or limited impacts on sanctioned persons. Our research and other studies show that these assumptions are flawed and lead to extensive derogations from basic procedural rights and safeguards against abuse. The lack of effective safeguards means that people who face abuse through fining practices have limited avenues of redress.

Police as Judge: Unchecked Broad Discretion to Issue Fines

According to the law, from the moment a police officer draws up an incident report (*procès-verba*)—based on their subjective assessment—an offense is deemed to have been committed. Article 537 of the Criminal Code of Procedure considers police reports "authentic until proven otherwise," attributing a legal presumption of accuracy and truth to these reports, without requiring the police officer to establish by clear and convincing evidence that a person has committed an infraction. As a consequence, it is up to persons challenging their fines to prove that they are not guilty.

Assessing noise nuisances is up to an officer's discretion. The Code of Public Health (*Code de la santé publique*) states that noise amounts to a nuisance based on "duration, repetition, or intensity" and where it affects "neighborhood peace or people's health, in a public or private space." These criteria allow considerable room for subjective interpretation, and police officers are not required to measure noise levels with a sound level meter to assess whether noise amounted to a nuisance. There is similarly no

guidance setting out criteria for police officers to determine when offenses of littering or illegal discharge of unsanitary liquids have been committed.

The vagueness and lack of regulation of these three public disturbance offenses means people are often not aware of what conduct is prohibited. For instance, gathering in a park is not inherently disruptive, but criteria indicating when it would amount to a nuisance are missing. Spilling a beverage on the ground is also not inherently unsanitary. What may be deemed “undesirable” conduct is also not objectively measurable. Fines therefore rest on subjective assessments of a police officer, which risks discriminatory and abusive application.

Details about police officers’ subjective assessment of the factual circumstances are not communicated to the fined person, which affects their ability to challenge their fine. The police incident report with more detailed accounts is not even accessible to individuals.

For this research we examined all available fine notices received by the young men with whom we spoke, finding that in every instance the fine notices simply listed the legal designation of the alleged offense, along with the time, date, and location.⁹¹ Fine notices for noise nuisances lacked information on the kind or intensity of the alleged noise made. Fine notices for littering lacked any description of the type of litter and whether the officer witnessed the person throw the litter on the ground or found it already on the ground. Fine notices do not record whether the fined person was alone or in a group, nor do they describe allegedly simultaneous commission of multiple offenses.

In 2022, the Council of State acknowledged that the decision to issue a fine rested on the discretion of the police officer, which “in the absence of a regulatory framework ... will inevitably lead to a risk of arbitrariness and disparities in treatment that violate the principle of equality before the law.”⁹² This opinion addressed the government’s draft legislation of 2022 extending the system of fines to nearly 3,400 offenses.

⁹¹ Fine notices contain basic information including a reference to the alleged offense in violation of relevant law; the fine amount owed; how to pay; the deadline for payment; a reference to the government’s website to contest the fine; and a note that payment of a fine constitutes an admission to the offense.

⁹² Council of State, “Avis no. 404913 sur un projet de loi d’orientation et de programmation du ministère de l’intérieur et portant diverses dispositions en matière pénale et sur la sécurité intérieure,” opinion of March 10, 2022, <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/avis-consultatifs/derniers-avis-rendus/au-gouvernement/avis-sur-un-projet-de-loi-d->

In 2023, the Defender of Rights also warned about “arbitrariness and disparities in treatment, contrary to the principle of equality before the law” because police “are in charge of classifying the offense and decision on the appropriate criminal response,” which “carries a risk of increased discriminatory practices.”⁹³ In an opinion of March 2026, the Defender of Rights also noted that “errors made by police officers” risk becoming “irreversible” if people cannot access the information in police reports.⁹⁴

Prior evidence, dating to 2018, identified by the Court of Audit through an investigation into police’s implementation of traffic fines, demonstrated that decisions on fines were made inconsistently, were marred with procedural errors, and lacked independent oversight.⁹⁵

French authorities do not collect and publish disaggregated data on police implementation of fines, which would shed a light on their fining practices, including where police disproportionately target specific parts of the population.⁹⁶ Limited official data related to pandemic-related fines provided first evidence of disproportionate implementation in low-income working-class neighborhoods compared to the rest of France.⁹⁷

Appeals Out of Reach

The police have an easy time issuing fines, so contesting them is going to be impossible. No police officer has ever told me I could contest fines.

—David, 19, Paris, February 2025

orientation-et-de-programmation-du-ministere-de-l-interieur-et-portant-diverses-dispositions-en-matiere-penale-et-sur-l (accessed May 29, 2026), para. 38.

⁹³ Defender of Rights, Framework Decision 2023-030 of May 30, 2023, p. 15.

⁹⁴ Defender of Rights, “Avis du Défenseur des droits n° 26-02,” opinion, March 30, 2026, https://juridique.defenseurdesdroits.fr/doc_num.php?explnum_id=23158 (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 9.

⁹⁵ Court of Audit, “La gestion des amendes de circulation : une dématérialisation achevée, des insuffisances à surmonter,” annual report, February 2018, <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2018-01/06-gestion-amendes-circulation-Tome-2.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 179.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM sent freedom of information requests to relevant French authorities to seek police data on fines: Letter from Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM to Interior Ministry and Paris Police Prefecture, “Subject: Request for access to administrative documents, files, and statistics concerning fixed fines issued for nighttime and daytime noise disturbances, dumping of waste outside authorized locations, and discharge of unsanitary liquids.” March 24, 2025. See methodology section of this report for more information on correspondence.

⁹⁷ See Chapter I for more information.

As the law deems police fine reports authentic until proven otherwise, a person seeking to contest their fines (*requête en exonération*) has to prove that a police officer's report is false or erroneous.

As noise nuisances, littering, and illegal discharge of liquids are fleeting acts, it is nearly impossible to disprove the police report, unless the person can prove conclusively they were not present at the location at the time of the alleged offense.

Hassan felt that the process to challenge fines was intentionally designed to be out of reach:

It is up to us fined people to show that we didn't commit these offenses. It is going to be very difficult, almost impossible, to prove that we didn't commit these offenses. If a police officer, who has taken an oath, issues a fine, obviously, the authorities will believe him.⁹⁸

Persons seeking to challenge their fines face numerous procedural, practical, and financial barriers.

Contesting a fine requires that the person knows that they have been fined.

As illustrated in the section *Discriminatory and Abusive Fines*, young people's testimony, and reports of independent national human rights bodies, police officers frequently issue fines remotely. None of the young men we interviewed ever had to provide a signature or had ever received a fine notice in person.

A police officer explained to us that new procedures following the modernization of police equipment instructed officers to seek people's electronic signatures when recording fines in their tablets or smartphones to make a person aware of a fine.⁹⁹ A person may refuse to sign, but this does not invalidate the fine.

⁹⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM online interview with Hassan (anonymized), Essonne department, July 21, 2025.

⁹⁹ (RE)CLAIM interview with police officer (anonymized), Lyon, December 18, 2025; see also Interior Ministry, "Contrôle et modernisation de la politique de la circulation et du stationnement routiers," annual report, 2022, p. 4, <https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/20796> (accessed May 29, 2026).

According to article R49-1 of the Criminal Code of Procedure, individuals should receive a fine notice during a physical interaction with the officer who observed the offense. Where the notice cannot be directly provided, it may be sent to the person's home address. People we interviewed only received fine notices by mail rather than in person.

In 2022, the Defender of Rights observed “repeated errors” in fined persons' names or addresses that resulted in the non-delivery of initial fine notices.¹⁰⁰

Where fine notices arrive late, recipients risk missing the deadline of 45 days to contest their fine. Late delivery also adds to the difficulty of gathering evidence to substantiate a request to challenge a fine or even recall the circumstances of the fine.

Limited Chances of Success in Challenging Fines

Once a person has submitted a request to challenge their fine, a designated officer acting under the authority of the public prosecutor (*officier du ministère public*, OMP) is tasked to determine the admissibility of the request.¹⁰¹ A decision of admissibility refers the case to the police court. By law, admissibility decisions should only be based on formal criteria, including whether a request was made within the deadline to contest a fine, leaving the court to rule on the merits of the challenge. In practice, the OMP often rejects requests based on the merits. The Defender of Rights flagged that the OMP tends to:

overstep their powers by ruling on the merits themselves and rejecting requests that are admissible in form, an illegal practice already denounced by France's independent public ombudsperson (*Médiateur de la République*). The law stipulates that all admissible requests must be forwarded to a judge, who alone is authorized to rule on the merits.¹⁰²

The Defender of Rights cited case law of the European Court of Human Rights, which found France had violated the right to a fair trial because it deemed that the OMP exceeded its

¹⁰⁰ Defender of Rights, Opinion no. 22-02 of October 2022, p. 5.

¹⁰¹ The designated officer is often a specialist police officer who represents the prosecutor's office.

¹⁰² Defender of Rights, “Décision du Défenseur des droits n° n°12-R003,” June 12, 2012, https://juridique.defenseurdesdroits.fr/doc_num.php?explnum_id=1407 (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 8.

“discretionary power ... limited to examining formal admissibility of an appeal” when it ruled on the merits.¹⁰³

(RE)CLAIM’s examination of OMP responses to 40 requests to challenge fines showed that in 39 cases, the OMP rejected them based on merits with similar wording:

The material facts of the recorded offense are established; the incident report recording this offense is authentic until proven otherwise, which has not been demonstrated in the present case.

Nadège received a similarly worded rejection when she sought to contest her son’s fines, even though she had attached a supporting letter. She told us she felt that “the avenues of appeal are immediately closed.”¹⁰⁴ In practical terms, this means that while accused persons have to prove that they are not guilty, supporting evidence disproving a police report may still be deemed insufficient.

In the rare case that the OMP declares an appeal request admissible, it is forwarded to the police court. The judge may issue a summary criminal order (*ordonnance pénale*), that is, a ruling without a formal hearing.¹⁰⁵ Only at last instance can a person object to the summary criminal order (*opposition à ordonnance pénale*) and request to be heard in adversarial proceedings. Access to legal aid is not available to people when challenging their fines.

The Court of Audit found that less than three percent of requests to challenge traffic fines had resulted in a referral to the police court in 2016, and 90 percent of such requests had been declared inadmissible.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, in 2026, the Court of Audit’s examination of fines for misdemeanors showed that the OMP dismissed over half—56 percent—of admissible requests.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ European Court of Human Rights, *Célice v. France*, no. 14166/09, judgment of March 8, 2012, available at www.echr.coe.int, para. 34.

¹⁰⁴ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nadège (anonymized), Saint-Denis, June 11, 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Articles 524-528 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, version in force since July 1, 2016, repealed by Ordinance No. 2025-1091 of November 19, 2025 - art. 1 (V) - effective January 1, 2029, amended by Ordinance No. 2016-413 of April 7, 2016 - art. 8, https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI000032376447. (accessed May 29, 2026).

¹⁰⁶ Court of Audit, annual report of February 2018, p. 179.

¹⁰⁷ Court of Audit, “Le bilan des amendes forfaitaires,” Communication to the finance committee of the National Assembly, March 2026, <https://www.ccomptes.fr/sites/default/files/2026-04/20260415-Bilan-des-amendes-forfaitaires-delictuelles.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 8.

Contesting fines also incurs financial risks and costs. When the OMP forwards a person's request to the police court, a finding of guilty will result in a penalty that cannot be lower than the amount of the contested fine.¹⁰⁸ For some offenses, this can increase to €750.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, persons need to pay court fees of €31. Contesting fines and losing therefore come at a high price for people.

Given the complexity, barriers, and costs of this process, most young people we spoke to had never contested their fines. Indeed, their testimonies expressed disillusionment and lack of understanding of the process to challenge fines. Those who had done so, only proceeded with the help of a social worker or family member. Social workers themselves told us that navigating the process was not easy.

Seydi said he never contested his fines:

I don't even know if it's possible and what are the chances that I come out as the winner in such a process? You know from the beginning that it will lead to nothing, so why even try?¹¹⁰

André said he did not know how to contest fines and that he felt the prospects of success were slim. "Since the police is a representative of the state, the battle is lost from the beginning, so there is no point in contesting—the police officer hands in his fine report and it is over for us," he said.¹¹¹

A social worker said it was "complicated" and "complex" to assist young men to contest their numerous fines because it involved gathering various documents to substantiate their claims: fines notices—which many no longer had—bank statements, fine debt records, and other documents.¹¹² She said that extensive paperwork was needed to simply "request a pardon or waiver of surcharge fees" of fines, without even contesting fines

¹⁰⁸ Article 530-1 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. See also the study published by Defender of Rights in April 2025, p. 29.

¹⁰⁹ €750 is the maximum amount for fourth class offenses including littering, illegal discharging of unsanitary liquids, and certain types of noise nuisances. Other types of noise nuisances can rise up to a maximum of €450.

¹¹⁰ (RE)CLAIM and MCDS interview with Seydi (anonymized), Bagnolet, April 16, 2025.

¹¹¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with André (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹¹² Human Rights Watch and MCDS interview with Manon anonymized, social worker, July 30, 2025.

entirely. In one case, she said the authorities never responded to her appeal request—at the time of speaking with us, she had been waiting for over a year.

A mother, Monia said to us, “Contesting fines just to say what? ‘My son didn’t do anything?’ Who’s going to believe you? It is pointless.”¹¹³

For young people who experience the police as an institution that disproportionately targets them daily without accountability, procedures to challenge fines were meaningless given that the law deemed police to be right from the outset. Seydi told us he felt defenseless against the police because the system of fines was “part of a system that is truly unjust.”¹¹⁴ André said, “It is us against the state, we know we do not stand a chance.”¹¹⁵ Hassan said young people were “at the police’s mercy.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Monia (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹¹⁴ (RE)CLAIM and MCDS interview with Seydi (anonymized), Bagnolet, April 16, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with André (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹¹⁶ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM online interview with Hassan (anonymized), Essonne department, July 21, 2025.

IV. Socio-Economic and Other Impacts

I'm 24 years old; I owe €36,000 in fine debt. How do you expect me to get out of this?

–Djibril, 24, Essonne department, July 2025

How am I going to pay for this? I don't have the money.

–David, 19, Paris, February 2025

Fine debt has particularly serious impacts for young people from low-income households and their families and can cause economic hardship. Parents are not legally responsible for their children's fines, but as fine notices are sent to their homes and fines increase if left unpaid, parents feel pressure to pay their sons' fines. Some people in low-income households told us they had to choose between paying fines or paying rent, electricity, or food.

Overwhelming, Insurmountable Fine Debt

I thought it [my debt] was €7,000-8,000, but the more I opened the letters at home, the more I realized it was even higher.

–Benjamin, 24, Saint-Denis, May 2025

What gets me the most is that the authorities drain the accounts of young people, children. As soon as they start working, the authorities send a notice directly to their employer to deduct part of their salaries.

–Nema, mother, Paris, February 2025

Some of the young men we interviewed knew the total amount of their fine debt, while others knew only that it amounted to at least several thousand euros, including penalty increases. While individuals can request a fine debt record (*bordereau de situation des amendes*) from the public treasury (*Trésor public*), this requires sufficient knowledge of procedures. Even when requested, these statements are not necessarily error-proof. For

one young man whose case we reviewed, his requested fine record failed to show total accumulated fine debt, leaving him without full awareness of his total fine debt.¹¹⁷

Social workers described how young men often only learned about the scale of their debt when a formal debt collection notice from the state arrived in their mailboxes.¹¹⁸ Social workers also told us that young people did not know how much debt they still owed following state debt collection measures and how much new debt they accumulated through new fines.¹¹⁹

Young men’s lack of knowledge of the amount of their unpaid fine debt stemmed from having years of accumulated fines dating back to their childhood, when they were unaware of the implications of fines. Many of the young men we spoke with often ignored their fines when they were children, often trying to also hide them from their parents as long as they could.

David told us that when he received fines as a child, a fine notice was just a “piece of paper,” which he threw away to “make it disappear.”¹²⁰ He explained that police’s interaction with youth contributed to the lack of understanding of the real-life consequences of fines:

Police say to the young people, ‘You’re lucky we only give you a fine.’ Police make you believe that it’s nothing, they don’t explain the impacts of fines. ... Later in life, you understand fines ruin your life.

The implications of the numerous fines, increased by penalties and fees, started to catch up with them when they reached young adulthood. Where young men knew what they owed or we were able to check their fine debt records, we heard about or saw amounts ranging between €1,600 and €37,000. Nema told us that she estimated her sons’ fine debt at €30,000.¹²¹ Social workers said that they knew of fine debt cases of up to €50,000.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Ryan, Essonne department, May 5, 2025.

¹¹⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Laure (anonymized), social worker, April 2, 2025.

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

¹²⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

¹²¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nema (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹²² Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

Fines Can Increase Exponentially for Minor Public Disturbance Offenses



Graphic © 2026 Human Rights Watch

Ten of the young men we spoke with knew they had received pandemic-related fines that had significantly increased their total fine debt and remained a financial burden long after the pandemic ended.¹²³

¹²³ It is likely that more had received such fines but did not know it.

People may not pay fines for various reasons: they may not receive notices; they may not have the means to pay; and, in the case of children, they may not have fully understood the consequences of not paying fines. Regardless, the consequence of not paying is that after 45 days of non-payment, fines automatically increase.

While base rates of individual fines already cause economic hardship for families from low-income households, young people end up with tens of thousands of euros in accumulated fine debt as a result of these automatic increases and further penalty surcharges.¹²⁴ Virginie told us that three fines for littering, spitting, and noise nuisances for each of her three sons during a joint, single encounter with police totaled over €1,000 for all fines.¹²⁵

In the case of fines that remain unpaid, the public treasury, responsible for recovering debt owed to the state, can initiate debt collection measures.

A police officer explained that fines rise exponentially, first through penalty increases, and then also through fees related to state debt collection measures, including “bank fees and legal procedures.”¹²⁶

The public treasury may initiate debt collection measures directly with a bank or an employer to seize funds from bank accounts or garnish persons’ wages through so-called ‘administrative seizure by third parties’ procedures (*saisie administrative à tiers détenteur*)—ensuing fees have to be covered by persons owing the debt.

Fatou was shocked when the state seized funds from one of her son’s savings accounts to collect his fine debt. She had opened the account to save money for his future:

When there was no money left in the account, we incurred bank fees. I told the bank that I didn’t understand why the money was being seized from the

¹²⁴ For example, €68 or €135 is the base rate for class 3 and 4 fines respectively and increases come up to €180 or €375 respectively.

¹²⁵ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Virginie (anonymized), Lyon, June 29, 2025.

¹²⁶ (RE)CLAIM interview with Omer (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

account. They replied: “It’s the state, we can’t do anything...” I already have to pay the fine and on top I pay the charges. I can’t get out of it.¹²⁷

Seizure of funds from bank accounts generate bank fees for the seizure of funds and overdrawn accounts. Fatou said she closed her son’s bank account because of these additional fees. A social worker told us that several young men they knew had done the same to avoid owing additional fees on top of their already overwhelming fine debt.¹²⁸ Closing bank accounts creates a barrier for young people to seek legal employment, as most employers insist on one for salary payment.

Young men expressed anxiety about debt collection. Ali was worried that losing part of his salary would not leave him with enough money to pay bills.¹²⁹ Adam explained, “Every time I check my bank account, the money is gone. My bank account is always at zero. I just see ‘administrative seizure of funds,’ without knowing for which fine this money pays.”¹³⁰

David said the authorities had contacted his employer directly to garnish parts of his modest salary.

That’s when I realized how serious this was. Young people accept the fine, but they don't know the repercussions; that’ll come later. My employer asked me, ‘How come you have these fines? You're 19, how can you have a €750 fine?’ He thinks I owe just one fine. He doesn't know that I owe at least €5,000 in fines.¹³¹

Socio-Economic Impacts for Young People and Families

Our parents don’t have the means to pay the fines or to prioritize paying them over other expenses. As a result, from the age of 16, we already owe money to the state.

–Seydi, 21, Bagnolet, April 2025

¹²⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Fatou (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹²⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Laure (anonymized), social worker, April 2, 2025.

¹²⁹ (RE)CLAIM and MCDS interview with Ali (anonymized), Bagnolet, April 16, 2025.

¹³⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Adam (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹³¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

It's the same salary that pays the fines, feeds the children, pays the rent, pays the electricity bill, and provides for the family.

–Fatou, mother, Paris, February 2025

When I was a minor, it was my mother who paid my fines. My mother raised me alone. It was hard for her. She doesn't have money. The fines have a family impact. It is stressful for parents.

–Malik, 22, Saint-Denis, April 2025

In 2022, the Defender of Rights raised concerns with the government about the increasing number of complaints it received regarding fines, noting the “the precarious situation into which these fines lead some of the people concerned... often young people with low incomes who see their financial difficulties accumulate... compromis[ing] their future.”¹³²

Young people, parents and social workers described to us the consequences of fine debt. André, 25, told us the authorities had seized funds from his bank account he had saved to pay rent arrears and rent that was soon due.¹³³ Adam, 22, still lived with his mother because bank seizures by the authorities left him with insufficient funds to be able to rent his own apartment.¹³⁴ Manon, a social worker, asked, “How can they find housing if their bank account is always empty?”¹³⁵

Where a debtor is unemployed, the state can recover debt by garnishing certain social security benefits, such as unemployment benefits or sickness benefits. Manon told us about a young man who had a significant part of his unemployment benefits garnished. She said, “The entire period he was unemployed, €200 were deducted every month from his unemployment benefits.”¹³⁶

Young men told us they feared that once they began earning a salary, the authorities would garnish parts of it, leaving them with insufficient funds for everyday expenses. Social workers said they had observed that debt collection pushed some young people to stop

¹³² Defender of Rights, Opinion no. 22-02 of October 2022, p. 5.

¹³³ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with André (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹³⁴ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Adam (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹³⁵ Human Rights Watch and MCDS interview with Manon anonymized), social worker, July 30, 2025.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

working or not seek formal employment because they did not want their earnings to be used to pay fines resulting from discriminatory policing.¹³⁷

Djibril, 24, said salary garnishment had drastically reduced his earnings and caused emotional distress:

It's hard to tell yourself you're going to work 35 hours a week. In the end, they'll give me €500–600, and it will all go into the state's pocket—for fines that were fabricated. They throw fines at me left and right. 'Here, you owe money.' I'm 25, I owe €36,000. How am I supposed to get out of this? For a year-and-a-half, two years, I have worked for free. I have given my effort, my time, and in the end I get nothing, I give everything to the state. It's not possible. Mentally, it blocks you, it knocks you down.¹³⁸

Djibril is from one of the lowest-income municipalities in metropolitan France, with an annual median disposable income of €14,000 to €15,000.

David said:

When I saw that seizure of €750, I said, 'That's it. I'm stopping work. Every month you take my salary. I'll go work off the books, undeclared, take my pay in cash and carry on with my life like that.' If [debt collection] continues, that's what I'll be forced to do. It's my only option.¹³⁹

Social workers emphasized that young men want to work, resolve their debt and build a future, but feel trapped. Sofiane described it as young people being “in debt for life and wasting years paying it off.”¹⁴⁰

For some, garnishing their wages cost them their jobs. A police officer whose son had received fines told us that his son was doing an apprenticeship for two years and received

¹³⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

¹³⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Djibril (anonymized), Essonne department, July 8, 2025.

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM and MCDS interview with Sofiane (anonymized), Saint-Denis, March 29, 2025.

positive feedback from his employer until the authorities reached out to garnish parts of his earnings. “Obviously the employer wondered what he had done,” he told us. “My son asked for one more year [on the job] but wasn’t kept on.”¹⁴¹

David explained that his fine debt blocked his business ambitions:

I spoke with my friends about wanting to open a restaurant. They told me it’s easy, you take out a bank loan. But now, I can’t get credit [because of the debt]. I’m stuck in life, even though I was a minor when police did this to me.¹⁴²

Benjamin said his fine debt had prevented him from living fully:

I tell myself that if I don’t resolve this problem, when I grow up, when I have an apartment, I’ll be in debt. I’ll work, but it’ll only be to pay them [the authorities]. And above all, if I get married tomorrow, my wife will also have problems because of this, even though she hasn’t asked for it. I’ve got off to a bad start. I can’t do what I want in life.¹⁴³

The impact of fines and the ensuing debt extends to young people’s families. Parents described the sacrifices they had to make when they tried to pay the exorbitant fine debt their sons had accrued at an early age.

Monia paid for some of her son’s fines when he was younger but that meant that she was unable to pay for his driver’s license or buy new shoes for her youngest son. She said, “Last month, I was supposed to buy my son a pair of sneakers. I had to say ‘No, next month.’ That way, I would have €30 more to pay for food that month.”¹⁴⁴

Monia said her son feels guilty for putting her in the position of having to pay his fines.

¹⁴¹ (RE)CLAIM interview with Omer (anonymized), Lyon, July 5, 2025.

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with David (anonymized), Paris, February 2, 2025.

¹⁴³ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Benjamin (anonymized), Saint-Denis, May 3, 2025.

¹⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Monia (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

My son asked me for forgiveness, even though I know he hasn't done anything wrong. My son is responsible. He knows I'm paying because he isn't working, he's still in school. He knows I'm tired. He sees me leave at 5 a.m. to go wash dishes in a restaurant. I tell him it'll get better. I pay [the debt] little by little and I don't let him see that I'm worried.

Monia felt that the authorities intended to exert pressure on parents by making them pay.

It's like a threat against the parents. They want the parents to suffer and prohibit the young people from going outside. The authorities don't respect us. It's a tactic to control our children.

Fatou told us that the fines of three of her six sons caused serious financial difficulties for her family. Among other impacts, needing to pay the fines meant that the family could not visit The Gambia, her place of birth, and her children could not see their grandparents.¹⁴⁵

The financial pressure takes a mental and physical toll on parents. Fatou and other mothers described physical and mental health issues because of the distress that their sons' fines caused. "There is no mother who sleeps. We don't sleep," she said.¹⁴⁶

Excluded from Public and Social Life

Young people's accounts show that that police's use of fines led them, consciously or unconsciously, to withdraw their public presence in their neighborhoods to avoid attracting police harassment.

Some said they changed the times they socialized with friends outside because they knew when police patrolled their neighborhood and some, that they stopped socializing outside altogether. Some youth said they made sure to only walk alone in their neighborhood because walking in groups risked attracting police harassment, while some said they changed the way they dressed. The threat of fines led some to avoid being seen with others because of how those young people dressed or appeared. Some said they hid from

¹⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Fatou (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

police, including by avoiding certain part of the neighborhood where they knew police frequently issued fines.

Benjamin told us that he and his friends stopped going to a neighborhood park they had gone to since childhood, because of frequent police harassment.¹⁴⁷ Ryan just stopped spending time outside with friends “to avoid the police ... [because] when they see me, they fine me.”¹⁴⁸ André felt he could not “be in the neighborhood in the evening ... be outside in summer ... [because police will] come to our doorsteps.”¹⁴⁹ Adam said he asked himself every time he went out: “Is it worth it to go outside?”¹⁵⁰

Social workers observed that some young people had started withdrawing from public life due to the fear of fines, rendering them “completely hidden” from society.¹⁵¹

Parents expressed that they would not stop their sons leaving France, because it was unbearable for them to witness the reality of how their sons endured police harassment through fines. They stressed that the harassment took a severe mental health toll on their children and that their efforts to escape harassment only add distress and isolation.

Nema said she told her youngest son to go abroad to avoid getting more fines.¹⁵² Fatou said one of her sons “was forced to leave” France because “if he works, the state takes his money; if he opens an account, they seize from it.”¹⁵³ Amira, mother to a 15-year-old son who had accumulated significant fine debt, said she regularly arranged for her son to go abroad, because “he cannot step outside our own home peacefully.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Benjamin (anonymized), Saint-Denis, May 3, 2025.

¹⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Ryan (anonymized), Essonne department, May 5, 2025.

¹⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with André (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Adam (anonymized), Paris, April 4, 2025.

¹⁵¹ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Michelle and Grégoire, social workers, July 16, 2025.

¹⁵² Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Nema (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹⁵³ Human Rights Watch and (RE)CLAIM interview with Fatou (anonymized), Paris, February 1, 2025.

¹⁵⁴ (RE)CLAIM interview with Amira (anonymized), Lyon, April 1, 2026.

V. International and Regional Legal Standards

This report documents a range of abusive practices that give rise to distinct but interconnected violations of France's obligations under international and regional human rights law.

Racial Discrimination

Discrimination is illegal under French law. Article 1 of the French Constitution guarantees “the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race or religion.”¹⁵⁵

Moreover, article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) defines racial discrimination as

“any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”¹⁵⁶

Article 2 clarifies that France’s obligations extend not only to deliberate acts of racial discrimination, but also to all laws and policies “which have the effect of creating or perpetuating racial discrimination.”

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) similarly guarantee equal protection before the law and prohibit discrimination in the enjoyment of rights.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Art. 225-1 of the French Criminal Code defines discrimination as “any distinction ... by reason of their origin, sex, family situation, physical appearance or name, state of health, disability, genetic characteristics, sexual morals or orientation, age, political opinions, union activities, or ... membership or non-membership, true or supposed, of a given ethnic group, nation, race or religion.”

¹⁵⁶ International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), adopted December 21, 1965, G.A. res. 2106 (XX), 660 U.N.T.S. 195, entered into force January 4, 1969, ratified by France on July 28, 1971.

¹⁵⁷ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), adopted December 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171, entered into force on March 23, 1976, accession by France on November 4, 1980, art. 26. Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, as amended) (1950) ETS 5, art. 14.

The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), in charge of interpreting and monitoring state compliance with the ICERD, set out common elements of racial profiling. Conditions are met where law enforcement officials rely, to any degree, on race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin as a basis for subjecting persons to law enforcement action or for determining whether an individual engaged in criminal activity. Racial profiling constitutes racial discrimination in violation of ICERD.¹⁵⁸

This definition aligns with guidance of the Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), the Council of Europe anti-racism body, recommending that Council of Europe member states “clearly define and prohibit racial profiling by law.”¹⁵⁹ ECRI also recommends that states

“carry out research on racial profiling and monitor police activities in order to identify racial profiling practices, including by collecting data broken down by grounds such as national or ethnic origin, language, religion and nationality in respect of relevant police activities.”

The European Commission’s anti-racism strategy 2026-2030 adopted in January 2026 encourages European Union member states to address racial bias in public administration, including the police, and to “ensure fair and evidence-based policing practices, backed by accountability mechanisms.”¹⁶⁰ A 2022 European Commission’s study on protection gaps against racial discrimination in EU member states recognized that authorities’ racial prejudices could result in measures that sought racial or ethnic minorities’ exclusion from

¹⁵⁸ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), General Recommendation No. 36, Preventing and combating racial profiling by law enforcement officials, U.N. Doc. CERD/C/GC/36, (2020), para. 13.

¹⁵⁹ ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 11 on Combating Racism and Racial Discrimination in Policing, CRI (2007)39, adopted June 29, 2007 and published October 4, 2007, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/recommendation-no.11> (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 4. The Council of Europe’s European Code of Police Ethics requires police officers to discharge their duties “in a fair manner, guided, in particular, by the principles of impartiality and non-discrimination.” Police investigations should be based on “a reasonable suspicion of an actual or possible offence or crime.” European Code of Police Ethics, <https://rm.coe.int/16805e297e> (accessed May 29, 2026), arts. 40 and 47.

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, “Union of Equality: Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030,” Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, COM(2026) 12 final, January 20, 2026, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/f4acc4d4-689e-4db8-8c89-c7243b76ab88_en?filename=JUST_template_comingsoon_standard_o.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), pp. 8-9.

or restrictions of their freedom of movement in public spaces.¹⁶¹ This could also lead to fines for use of public spaces, the study said.¹⁶² The study also observed that EU member states failed to collect necessary data to assess authorities' full scale of racial discrimination in public spaces.¹⁶³

This report documents how French police continue to target boys and young men perceived as Black, Arab, or North African from low-income households in working-class neighborhoods based on who they are and their presence in public spaces and not for what they have done. Evidence from authoritative studies and reports from national human rights bodies, which our research confirmed, indicate that young people receive fines where no criminal activity was committed.

In 2022, CERD already situated French police's fining practices in the context of racial discrimination, raising concerns with the French government about "the frequency with which the police and other law enforcement entities resort to identity checks ... and fixed-penalty, on-the-spot fines, disproportionately targeting members of certain minorities, in particular Africans, persons of African descent, persons of Arab origin."¹⁶⁴

Failing to collect and publish anonymized data on fines, disaggregated by indicators that facilitate statistical analysis of police's implementation of fines to identify disproportionate, discriminatory, or abusive criminal penalties against specific groups or parts of the population as well as failing to create effective independent oversight over police's fining powers that would provide scrutiny and accountability where police engage in abusive practices, constitute violations of France's positive obligation under ICERD to take effective measures to detect and address racial discrimination.

¹⁶¹ European Commission, "Study to support the preparation of an EU initiative to address possible gaps in the legal protection against discrimination on grounds of racial or ethnic origin," report, July 2022, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/d478fd5b-acf1-477d-8e72-902a6adb5dba_en?filename=possible_gaps_in_the_legal_protection_against_discrimination_on_grounds_of_racial_or_ethnic_origin.pdf (accessed May 29, 2026), p. 84.

¹⁶² 14 out of 20 survey respondents of the Commission's study believed that racial or ethnic discrimination by public actors leads to increased administrative checks or fines when using public space.

¹⁶³ European Commission study, p. 84.

¹⁶⁴ UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding observations: France, UN Doc. CERD/C/FRA/CO/22-23, December 14, 2022, para. 23.

Right to an Effective Remedy

Everyone whose rights have been violated shall have access to an effective remedy before a competent authority that deals with the substance of a complaint of abuse and grants appropriate relief. A remedy should be delivered through a fair process based on equality of arms and be sufficient, accessible, and adequate as well as capable of directly remedying the harm.

France is bound by several international and regional human rights treaties that enshrine this right, including article 13 of the ECHR and article 2(3) of the ICCPR.

Specific to racial discrimination, articles 2 and 6 of ICERD require France to guarantee effective protection and remedies against racial discrimination, including persistent discriminatory police practices.

As documented in this report, persons experiencing discriminatory and abusive fines have no access to an effective remedy whether to challenge the substance of the offense with which they have been charged, any due process failings, or whether racial discrimination was a factor in the fine being issued. The system has in-built procedural, compounded by practical, barriers, which render remedies ineffective, for any person unfairly fined for any of the offenses, whether due to error or abuse.

Fair Trial Rights

The Defender of Rights noted that the fining procedure “derogates from several principles of criminal law and criminal procedure, namely the principle of individualized sentencing, the right to the presumption of innocence, the principle of adversarial proceedings, the rights of the defense, and the right of access to a judge.”¹⁶⁵ The Defender of Rights continued that derogations were only admissible insofar as “they relate to minor offenses, of limited importance, lightly sanctioned, and above all, those that could be established purely through material evidence,” which documentation on the fining procedure and young men’s experiences demonstrated is not the case at hand.

¹⁶⁵ Defender of Rights, Framework Decision 2023-030 of May 30, 2023, p. 9.

Under international and regional human rights law, everyone faced with a criminal penalty has the right to be informed, promptly, and in detail, of the nature and cause of the accusation against them,¹⁶⁶ the right to be presumed innocent until proven guilty according to law,¹⁶⁷ and the right to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal.¹⁶⁸ These rights apply to children as well as to adults and are violated at every phase of the fining procedure.¹⁶⁹

The fining procedure empowers police officers to determine a person guilty of alleged offenses and punish them on the basis of overbroad legal provisions without the need to provide any explanation or information to the affected person who is charged and sanctioned immediately. As documented in this report, persons fined often only learn of the fines after the fact when they receive a fine notice. Individuals are often denied adversarial proceedings and access to a judge following quick dismissals of appeal requests based on merits instead of legally required formal criteria, denying individuals a public hearing before an independent tribunal. Even where a case reaches the police court, the judge may rule by summary criminal order without a hearing.

Additionally, the procedure presumes that individuals receiving a fine are guilty based on a legal presumption of accuracy of police incident reports, requiring individuals to prove they did not commit an offense rather than requiring the prosecution to establish guilt. Persons' ability to successfully contest their fines is further jeopardized by the lack of information contained in fine notices, their lack of awareness when police issue fines remotely without personal interaction, or late and non-delivery of fine notices that deny persons prompt and detailed information needed to prepare a timely and effective defense.

The fining procedure presumes guilt based on a police officer's subjective observation of an offense, yet denies people the right to defend themselves against abusive police

¹⁶⁶ Article 6(3)(a) of the ECHR and article 14(3)(a) of the ICCPR.

¹⁶⁷ Article 6(2) of the ECHR and article 14(2) of the ICCPR.

¹⁶⁸ Article 6(1) of the ECHR and article 14(1) of the ICCPR.

¹⁶⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), art. 40, adopted November 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force September 2, 1990, ratified by France August 7, 1990. In addition, as discussed more fully in the following section, children accused of infringing the law should receive the benefit of a differentiated, individualized approach that treats them in a manner consistent with the promotion of their sense of dignity and worth. *Ibid.*; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General Comment No. 24: Children's rights in the child justice system, U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/24 (2019), paras. 2-3.

conduct. This results in unfair punishment and can impose significant rights impacts, especially for children and young people from low-income households.

In 2022, the CERD flagged procedural violations ensuing from the procedure for fines, recommending to France to "[t]ake measures to ensure that police officers no longer impose fixed-penalty fines in a discriminatory manner against certain minority groups, and to guarantee that people from these groups have the right to contest these fines before a judge before any payment."¹⁷⁰ France has not implemented this recommendation.

Children's Rights

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) requires that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.¹⁷¹ Article 40 of the CRC requires that children in conflict with the law be treated in a manner consistent with their age and with the promotion of their reintegration into society, with appropriate procedural guarantees.

Article 6 of the CRC protecting children's right to their development includes socialization, particularly with peers, which is particularly important in adolescence.¹⁷² The practices identified in this report impede rather than promote adolescents' right to their development.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is in charge of interpreting and monitoring state compliance with the CRC, set out that comprehensive child justice policies should include "the decriminalization of minor offenses" and that any procedure imposing criminal penalties on children should include age-appropriate safeguards, such as prompt and direct information of the charge.¹⁷³ In the context of children's ability to use public spaces without facing criminal penalties, the Committee also expressed concern about increasing trends of "hostility towards adolescents in public spaces"¹⁷⁴ and

¹⁷⁰ CERD, Concluding observations: France, of December 2022, para. 24(a).

¹⁷¹ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force September 2, 1990, ratified by France August 7, 1990, art. 3.

¹⁷² CRC, General Comment No. 20: implementation of the rights of the child during adolescence, U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/20 (2016).

¹⁷³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), General Comment No. 24: Children's rights in the child justice system, U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/24 (2019), paras. 12 and 28-71.

¹⁷⁴ CRC, General Comment No. 20, para. 75.

authorities’ increased intolerance for children’s use of public spaces, seeing areas restricted based on “a perception of children as ‘problems’ and/or delinquents.”¹⁷⁵

French law does not provide for a distinction between criminal penalties affecting adults and children—nor does it regulate identity checks targeting children. France fails to provide necessary age-appropriate safeguards, including that children clearly understand the legal implications of criminal penalties against them, that non-payment leads to debt collection and bank seizures, which impact them and their parents, and that they are provided with legal or other assistance to navigate all parts of the procedure until all appeals are exhausted.¹⁷⁶

Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights

Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) guarantees the right to an adequate living standard of a person and their family, including food, clothing, housing, and social security.¹⁷⁷ The Revised European Social Charter (1996) also contains a right to protection against poverty and social exclusion.¹⁷⁸ Both treaties set out an explicit non-discrimination framework for the enjoyment of these rights.¹⁷⁹

By nature, fixed penalties are not tailored to individuals’ financial circumstances and disproportionately affect low-income people as well as people living in poverty. These penalties risk that individuals and entire families from low-income households are pushed into poverty or even homelessness, which has given rise to the term “poverty penalties”

¹⁷⁵ CRC, General Comment No. 17: right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life, and the arts (art. 31), U.N. Doc. CRC/C/GC/17 (2013), para. 23.

¹⁷⁶ CRC, General Comment No. 24, paras. 47-49.

¹⁷⁷ International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, December 16, 1966, 993 UNTS 3, entered into force on January 3, 1976, accession by France on November 4, 1980.

¹⁷⁸ European Social Charter, ETS No. 35, adopted October 18, 1961, entered into force February 26, 1965; European Social Charter (revised), ETS No. 163, adopted May 3, 1996, entered into force July 1, 1999, ratified by France on May 7, 1999.

¹⁷⁹ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), General Comment No. 20: Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (art. 2, para. 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), U.N. Doc. E/C.12/GC/20 (2009); and European Social Charter, Part V Art E.

by legal experts.¹⁸⁰ The 2012 UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights warned that fines perpetuate marginalization and vicious cycles of poverty.¹⁸¹

The socio-economic impacts of fines are not minor given that fine debt can reach tens of thousands of euros, and follows young people from childhood into adulthood. This can impact the ability of individuals and families to meet their rights to an adequate standard of living, including housing, food, and clothing.

Fine debt impairs young men’s access to formal employment—and thus their right to work—as well as to banking and housing. State debt collection measures extend to the garnishing of social security benefits. In 2024, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights raised concerns that when state debt collection is deducted from people’s salaries and social security benefits it can lead to houselessness.¹⁸²

France has accepted the optional protocol to the ICESCR, as well as the additional protocol to the revised European Social Charter, which allow for individual and collective complaints, respectively, to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the European Committee on Social Rights. While still untested mechanisms, these may result in future complaints by young people or civil society organizations supporting them, to fight the violations of their social and economic rights by France’s system of on-the-spot fines.

¹⁸⁰ Jean Galbraith et al., “Poverty Penalties as Human Rights Problems,” *American Journal of International Law*, 117(3), July 27, 2023, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-journal-of-international-law/article/poverty-penalties-as-human-rights-problems/2C4FFED59EFF533F6CDoCF97CB708E41> (accessed May 29, 2026) DOI:10.1017/ajil.2023.25.

¹⁸¹ UN Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, adopted by UN Human Rights Council on September 27, 2012, A/HRC/RES/21/11, paras. 65-66.

¹⁸² UN Special Rapporteurs on extreme poverty and on adequate housing, “Breaking the Cycle: Ending the Criminalization of Homelessness and Poverty,” joint study, U.N. Doc. A/HRC/56/61/Add.3, June 26, 2024, para. 15.

Recommendations

To National Authorities (including the President, the Prime Minister, the Interior Minister, and the Minister of Justice) and Parliament:

Legal Reforms

- Remove the offenses of noise disturbance, illegal discharge of unsanitary liquids, and littering from the Criminal Code given that their vague wording and the lack of standard criminal procedure safeguards around their enforcement, permits arbitrary, racialized, and abusive enforcement resulting in clear infringement of fundamental rights and guarantees. Until such removal, immediately suspend application of these offenses;
- Adopt legal and policy reforms to end discrimination in policing in particular as it manifests in identity checks, frisks, and searches, in line with France's obligations under international and regional human rights law.

Procedure For Fines and Data Collection

- Cancel all outstanding fine debt for the offenses addressed in this report, including accumulated penalty increases and additional administrative costs, given the fundamentally flawed basis and system on and through which fines have been imposed and administered;
- Ensure effective independent oversight and investigation powers over national police's implementation of fines to detect and end discriminatory and abusive practices, including by identifying and responding to red flags such as high volumes of fines issued by individual officers, systematic multiple simultaneous fining, and recurrent complaints of discriminatory and abusive fining;
- Collect and publish anonymized data on fines, disaggregated by indicators that facilitate statistical analysis of police's implementation of fines to identify disproportionate, discriminatory, or abusive criminal penalties against specific groups or parts of the population;
- Collect and publish data on the outcomes of appeal proceedings, disaggregated by offense category, including rates of rejection, referral to a judge, and cancellation;
- Ensure national police's full compliance with legal requirements to deliver fine notices in person during a direct physical interaction with the person fined, and

- where such delivery is not possible, the fine notice should state the specific reasons why not. Failing that, the person fined may invoke this as a ground for nullity on appeal;
- Ensure national police’s full compliance with legal requirements that every fine notice is accompanied by a request for the signature of the person fined, and where it cannot be obtained, the reason should be stated on the fine notice. Failing that, the person fined may invoke this as a ground for nullity on appeal;
 - Provide persons fined with clear information about the total amount of debt owed and the possibility of payment extensions, payment plans, or reduction of debt;
 - Remove the non-legally based designation of “undesirables” from all national police software and documents without further delay and ensure equivalent discriminatory categories do not replace it;
 - Swiftly accept the pending visit requests (first made in March 2022, and reminders sent in August 2023 and September 2024) by the Expert Mechanism to Advance Racial Justice and Equality in Law Enforcement (EMLER) to assist France with eliminating racial discrimination within law enforcement.

To Local Authorities (Mayors, Municipal Councils, Police Prefecture, Local Security Contract Partners):

- End local security policies designed to exclude young people from public spaces in working-class neighborhoods and instead invest in their safety, including explicit anti-discrimination commitments in local security contracts;
- Work with communities to identify non-criminal approaches to respond to any tensions and nuisances in public spaces, without increasing further marginalization of young residents in working-class neighborhoods;
- Develop and fund alternatives to law enforcement actions targeting young people’s presence in public space, including mediation, community, and youth programs;
- End municipal police’s discriminatory and abusive fining practices, including remotely issued fines;
- Ensure municipal police’s effective compliance with legal requirements to deliver fine notices in person and to seek a signature;
- Collect and publish anonymized data on fines, disaggregated by indicators that facilitate statistical analysis of municipal police’s implementation of fines to

- identify disproportionate, discriminatory, or abusive criminal penalties against specific groups or parts of the population;
- Ensure effective independent oversight and investigation powers over municipal police's implementation of fines to detect and end discriminatory and abusive practices, including by identifying and responding to red flags such as high volumes of fines issued by individual officers, systematic multiple simultaneous fining, and recurrent complaints of abusive or discriminatory fining;
 - Establish monitoring mechanisms with meaningful participation of impacted communities and civil society to evaluate the implementation of any reform of local security policies.

To the Defender of Rights:

- Issue a general framework decision assessing the compliance of fixed penalty fines for minor offenses with human rights guarantees, including the prohibition of racial discrimination, children's rights, criminal defense rights and the right to an effective remedy. Submit formal recommendations to parliament and the government on measures required to comply with international human rights law;
- Conduct timely and diligent investigations into complaints received concerning fining practices. Apply all dimensions of rights, including racial discrimination, children's rights, and ethics of security forces. Make full use of the Office's investigation and data collection powers. Where investigations reveal discriminatory and abusive fining practices, propose the implementation of disciplinary proceedings and issue recommendations for reform;
- Where collective complaints or multiple complaints from the same neighborhood or regarding the same police unit indicate possible systemic patterns, conduct in-depth investigations that extend beyond individual complaints. Publish findings and specific recommendations;
- Analyze complaints received to identify patterns of discriminatory and abusive police fining practices. Publish findings and specific recommendations;
- Monitor the rates and grounds for rejection of appeal requests and publicly scrutinize abuse of power.

To the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance:

- Include in the next monitoring report on France a specific assessment of fining practices targeting persons perceived as Black, Arab, or North African in working-class neighborhoods;
- Recommend that France collect and publish anonymized data on fines, disaggregated by indicators that facilitate statistical analysis of police's implementation of fines to identify disproportionate, discriminatory, or abusive criminal penalties against specific groups or parts of the population;
- Recommend that France ensure that fining practices are subject to independent oversight to detect abuse and discrimination, in line with ECRI General Policy Recommendation No. 11 on combating racism and racial discrimination in policing.

To the European Commission:

- Recommend that France collect disaggregated data on policing that allows for assessment of the full scale of racial discrimination in public spaces by police, in line with the objectives of the EU's anti-racism strategy 2026-2030 to combat structural discrimination in the EU.

To the UN Committees on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Rights of the Child, Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the UN Human Rights Committee:

- In its next periodic reviews request France to report on fining data and practices and concrete measures taken to end discrimination in fining as a method of public disturbance criminal sanctions, and to collect as well as publish disaggregated data to assess their scale;
- Call on France to cancel fine debt accumulated by children, including of adults who are still faced with debt accumulated when they were children;
- Call on France to remove the three offenses of noise disturbance, illegal discharge of unsanitary liquids, and littering, which are routinely used against children in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner that violates rights, from the Criminal Code;
- Call on France to implement CERD's Early Warning and Urgent Action recommendations of July 2023 concerning discriminatory policing practices affecting young men and boys perceived as Black, Arab, or North African.

To the UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, and the UN Working Group on people of African descent:

- Examine discriminatory and abusive fining practices in the context of eliminating racial profiling by law enforcement and racial inequalities in France in thematic reports or on country visits.

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Paying the Price of Police Harassment Discriminatory Fines Target Black and Arab Youth in France

French law grants police broad powers to issue on-the-spot fixed penalty fines to punish minor criminal offenses, including three public disturbance offenses: noise nuisances, littering and illegal discharge of liquids.

This joint report by Human Rights Watch, (RE)CLAIM and Maison Communautaire pour un Développement Solidaire (MCDS) builds on growing evidence that these police-administered and issued fines have become tools to target youth perceived as Black, Arab or North African, evict them from public spaces, and are intrinsically linked to persistent discriminatory police identity checks, frisks and searches.

The report documents how boys and young men can receive dozens of fines, from as young as 13 years old, including for fabricated offenses they could not have physically committed and how police can issue fines without having any interaction with the youth.

The report documents how legal amendments have undermined criminal procedure safeguards that leave persons victims of discrimination without meaningful redress and trapped in up to tens of thousands of euros in fine debt that can push youth and their families into poverty and compromise their future.

French authorities should immediately remove these three public disturbance offenses from the French Criminal Code and cancel all accrued fine debt for these offenses. The authorities should instead adopt and invest in community-centered approaches to address legitimate public disturbance concerns. Additional measures to combat racial discrimination within police should include effective independent oversight over police's implementation of fines and collection of disaggregated data that allows identification of discriminatory practices.



A mother faces her sons' unpaid fine debt of tens of thousands of euros resulting from dozens of fines they received throughout their childhood, Paris, France, June 2026.

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