

People's Audit Daily

The Local Government Extortion Racket

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What do **Andy Johnson, Anthony Smelley, the Hammond family, Charlie Engle, Tammy Cooper, Nancy Black, Russ Caswell, Jacques Wajsfelner, Jeff Counciller, Eric Garner, Martha Boneta, James Slatic, Carole Hinders, Salvatore Culosi, and James Lieto**, as well as **the Sierra Pacific Company** and the **entire Meitev family** have in common?

They are all victims of brutal, unfair, capricious, and evil government actions. And I challenge anyone to read their stories and not feel at least some degree of outrage at their mistreatment.

And now we're going to add Corey Statham to the list. The *New York Times* has **an all-too-typical report** of government greed and callousness.

Corey Statham had \$46 in his pockets when he was arrested in Ramsey County, Minn., and charged with disorderly conduct. He was released two days later, and the charges were dismissed. But the county kept \$25 of Mr. Statham's money as a "booking fee." ... He did get a debit card for the remaining \$21. But there was no practical way to extract his cash without paying some kind of fee. Among them: \$1.50 a week for "maintenance" of the unwanted card, starting after 36 hours; \$2.75 for using an A.T.M. to withdraw money; \$3 for transferring the balance to a bank account; and \$1.50 for checking the balance. ... Mr. Statham is represented by Michael A. Carvin, a prominent conservative lawyer who... said the county's motives were not rooted in solicitude for the people it had arrested. "Revenue-starved local governments are increasingly turning toward fees like Ramsey County's in order to bridge their budgetary gaps," he wrote in a Supreme Court brief. ... "Providing a profit motive to make arrests," he said, "gives officers an incentive to make improper arrests." ... \$25 is not a lot of money — unless you are poor. It represents almost half a day's work at the federal minimum wage, a federal judge wrote in a dissent in another case on booking fees.

I have no idea whether Mr. Statham is a sympathetic victim. But even if he's a total jerk, that doesn't change the fact that people who interact with the legal system should not be subject to fines or fees without a conviction.

This is yet another example of innocent people victimized by “**policing for profit,**” which notoriously happens **with civil asset forfeiture.**

And at the risk of sounding like a closet leftist, it bothers me when poor people and rich people face the same fines. I don’t know Statham’s situation, but there are plenty of low-income people who **can suffer severe financial consequences** when they have an unfortunate encounter with local law enforcement. Maybe we should **be like Switzerland** and proportionately adjust fines based on wealth. I don’t suggest that because I want local governments to have more money. Instead, I’m thinking such a policy would both make the law more equal and give the rest of us a strong incentive to fight against thuggish revenue-raising tactics.

P.S. I’m obviously on the side of Statham’s lawyer, but I can’t resist correcting something said by Michael Carvin. I’ve never looked at the numbers for Ramsey County, but, based on **nationwide fiscal data for state and local governments**, I will say with 99 percent confidence that Ramsey County is not “revenue-starved.” In the interests of accuracy, Mr. Carvin in the future should refer to local politicians as being “revenue-hungry.”

P.P.S. On a separate topic, here’s a **nice reminder** of the difference between the private sector and the government.

A man in Pomona was upset after a postal carrier was seen on surveillance video throwing a small package on his doorstep, but a surprise hero was also captured on footage. Brian Mundy sent the video to our sister station in Los Angeles using #abc7eyewitness. In it, you see the U.S. Postal Service carrier carelessly tossing the package. Much to Mundy’s surprise, moments later, a FedEx driver – wearing a reindeer hat – is seen gently putting down two packages. That driver even picks up the small box from the USPS carrier and gently puts it on top of the rest.

It’s all on video if you click on the story link. Yes, this is just an anecdote. And, yes, I’m sure there are plenty of bad FedEx employees and wonderful Postal Service employees. I’m mostly sharing the story for amusement value.

But I suspect **John Stossel was right** when he explained that, as a general rule, the private sector will do a better job.

Daniel J. Mitchell is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute, and a top expert on tax reform and supply-side tax policy. Mitchell’s articles can be found in such publications as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, Investor’s Business Daily, and the Washington Times. He is the author of "The Flat Tax: Freedom, Fairness, Jobs, and Growth," and co-author of "Global Tax Revolution: The Rise of Tax Competition and the Battle to Defend It."