

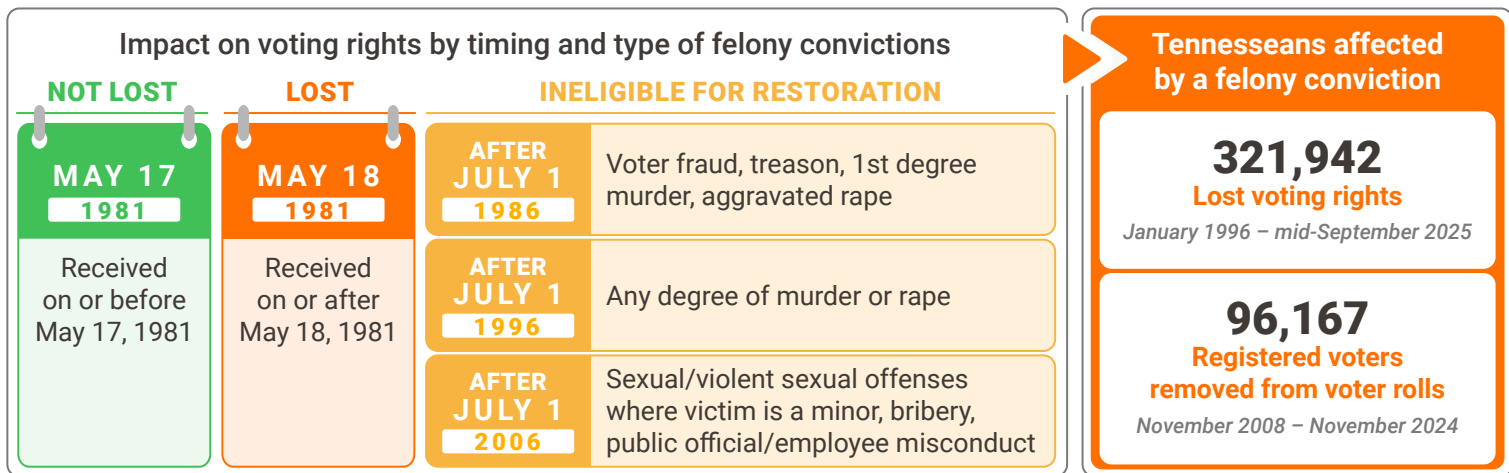
Restoring Voting Rights in Tennessee

Part 2: The voting rights restoration process

In Tennessee, as in most other states (except Vermont, Maine, and DC), voting rights are lost after a felony conviction. State processes for restoring voting rights vary, with Tennessee's process among the most complicated in the country.¹

In [Part One](#) of this *Restoring Voting Rights in Tennessee* report series, we sought to quantify how many Tennesseans this policy has impacted, using data on felony convictions and voter roll removals. Part Two looks at the restoration process—what the path to eligibility for restoration of voting rights looks like.

In Tennessee, voting rights are lost and may be restored with most felony convictions.



Source: Secretary of State, Restoration of Rights, and ThinkTennessee, *Restoring Voting Rights in Tennessee Part 1: How many Tennesseans have lost voting rights due to a felony conviction.*

Of the 321,942 Tennesseans convicted of felonies over a nearly 30-year period (1996-2025), **two-thirds have completed their sentence**, the first step to regaining eligibility to have their voting rights restored. ThinkTennessee cannot say definitively how many of those are eligible for restoration without individual-level data on the type of convictions or on whether the additional eligibility steps have been completed.

Instead, the data available paint a statewide picture of average financial obligation costs, totals, and trends over time—which helps demonstrate the scale and scope of the requirements attached to restoring voting rights after felony convictions in Tennessee. Our research shows that while there is considerable variation in financial obligations, restoring voting rights in Tennessee can involve significant financial considerations that factor into a person's path to eligibility.

Key Takeaways

- Two-thirds of those convicted of felonies from January 1996 to mid-September 2025 have completed their sentence.
- Data limitations leave a meaningful gap in understanding who is actually eligible for restoration today.
- Two recent laws have changed Tennessee's restoration process and eligibility requirements—rights are restored through a judicial rather than administrative process, and financial requirements have been reduced.
- A new financial cost—filing fees for restoration petitions—ranges from at least \$155.75 to \$314.50 depending on the county.

Tennessee's voting rights restoration process includes multiple requirements: complete the sentence, meet specific financial obligations, and demonstrate eligibility and merit to a court.

Eligibility requirements for restoring voting rights for eligible convictions

Pardon or Sentence Completion



Receive a pardon or be discharged from custody, including probation and parole

Financial Obligations



Meet restitution requirements and comply with child support orders for 12 months (including arrearages)

Process for restoring voting rights once eligible

As of May 2, 2025, Tennesseans petition a court with evidence that they have met the eligibility requirements and merit restoration



File petition for citizenship restoration in circuit court*



Demonstrate eligibility requirements are met



Demonstrate merit of restoration²



Court clerks notify the district attorneys general, the state attorney general and coordinator of elections, and the US attorney for federal convictions.



The attorneys may object in person or in writing.

*Petitions can be filed for restoration of full citizenship rights or just voting rights.

Note: For certain felony convictions, voting rights either cannot be restored or were never lost.
Source: Tenn. Code Ann. §§ 40-29-102, 40-29-103.

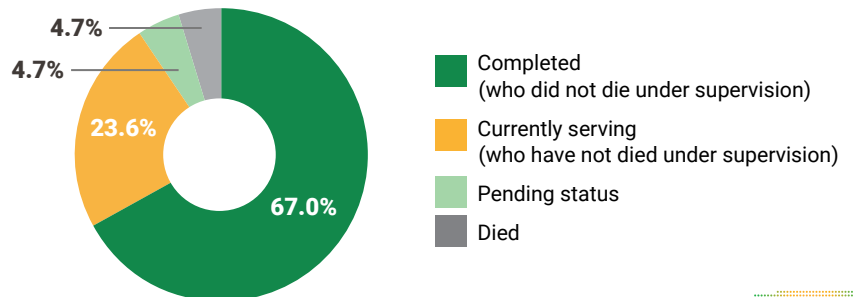


Over 215,000 Tennesseans convicted of felonies from 1996 to mid-September 2025 have completed their sentence, though not all will be eligible for voting rights restoration.

Data from the Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) show that from January 1996 to mid-September 2025, 321,942 people were convicted of a felony in Tennessee.³ As of mid-September 2025, records indicate that 67.0% have completed their sentence.

Nearly eight in 10 of those who have completed their sentence are men (78.9%) and seven in 10 are White (69.9%).

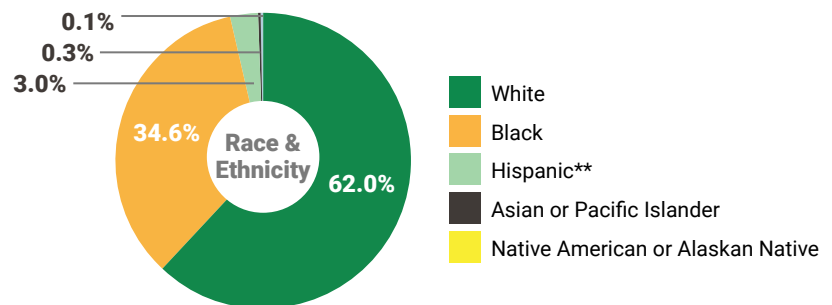
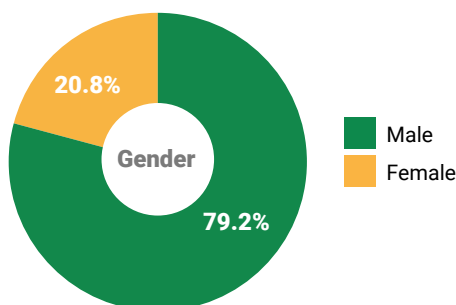
As of mid-September 2025, 67% of Tennesseans convicted of a felony since 1996 have completed their sentence.



Source: TDOC, Offender Management Information System, January 1, 1996 to September 16, 2025.



The majority of those convicted were White and male.



**People of Hispanic ethnicity can be of any race.
Number and Percentage of Individuals with Felony Convictions by Race and Ethnicity, 1996-Current (September 16, 2025).
Source: TDOC, Research and Planning Department, Tennessee Offender Management Information System, January 1, 1996 to September 16, 2025.



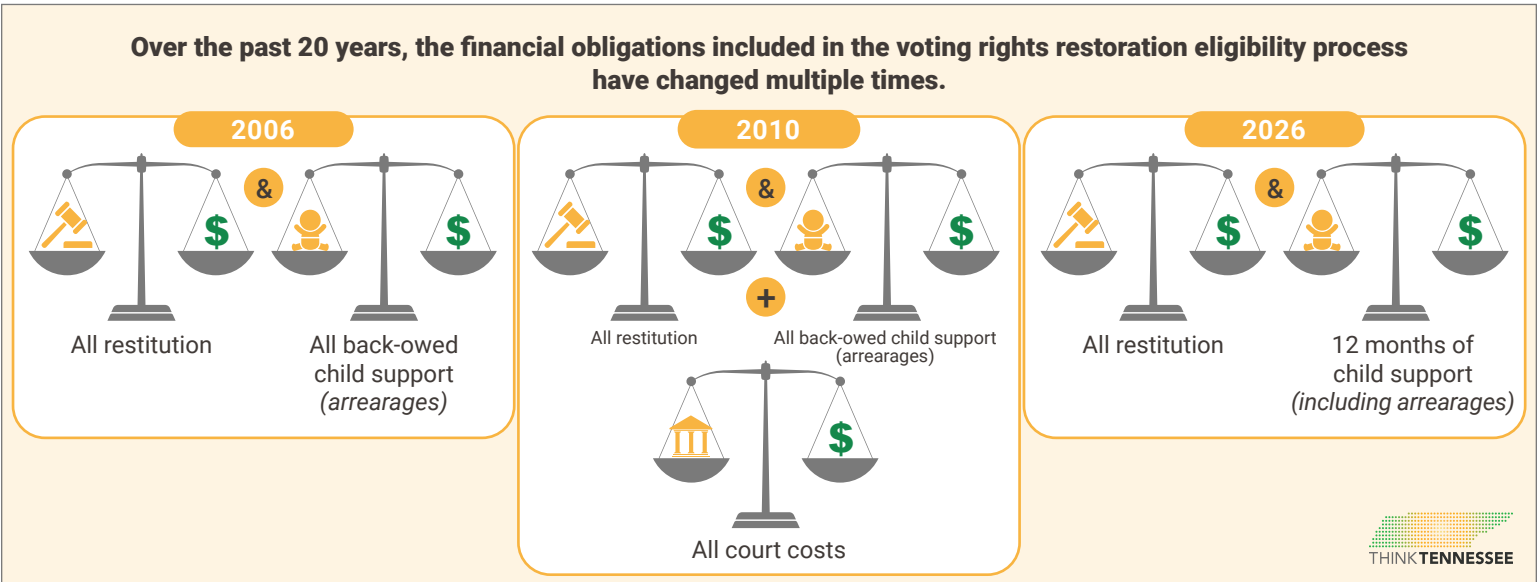
Not all of those who have completed sentences may be eligible to restore their voting rights.

Knowing how many people have completed their sentence does not tell us how many are eligible to have their voting rights restored. The data have three important limitations. First, they do not tell us the type of conviction, so we cannot identify those barred from eligibility by a permanently disqualifying offense. Second, some of those who completed their sentence may have since died or moved out of state. Third, completing a sentence is only the first step toward eligibility—there are also financial obligations that must be met before voting rights can be restored.



Tennesseans must meet specific financial obligations—restitution and child support—before becoming eligible for voting rights restoration.

Financial obligations have been part of Tennessee's voting rights restoration process since 2006, requiring Tennesseans seeking to restore their voting rights to first pay off three types of debts: restitution, court costs, and past due child support.⁴ As of March 26, 2026, court costs are no longer an eligibility requirement, and individuals with child support arrearages also become eligible after making 12 months of payments (rather than paying the arrearages in full).⁵



County-level data provide a partial picture of what these financial obligations may look like.

ThinkTennessee collected data on restitution and court costs from courts in 89 counties and on child support obligations from the Department of Human Services (DHS). The data are not uniform across all sources, which would allow us to provide a clear picture of the financial obligations Tennesseans must overcome to regain eligibility for voting rights.⁶ However, they do give us some insight into what the scale and scope of these debts may be.

Four data sources cover restitution, court costs, and child support—each with a different scope and unit of measurement.				THINKTENNESSEE
COURTS IN 89 COUNTIES			DHS	
• General Sessions courts in 86 counties reporting to the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) • Davidson County Criminal Court • Knox County Criminal Court • Shelby County Criminal Court			DHS oversees child support orders in Tennessee.	
	RESTITUTION	COURT COSTS	CHILD SUPPORT	
AOC FY2022 to FY2025 Felony & misdemeanor charges	Amounts assessed per fiscal year.	Amounts assessed per fiscal year analyzed <i>per disposed case</i> .	State-wide FY2018 to FY2024	
KNOX FY2019 to FY2025 Felony charges	Amounts received per fiscal year.	Amounts received per fiscal year.	Voting rights restoration requests received and approved per fiscal year	
SHELBY FY2019 to FY2025 Felony charges	Not collected	Amounts assessed per fiscal year and analyzed <i>per disposed case</i> .		
DAVIDSON FY2019 to FY2024 Felony charges	Not collected	Amounts assessed per fiscal year and analyzed <i>per individual</i> .		



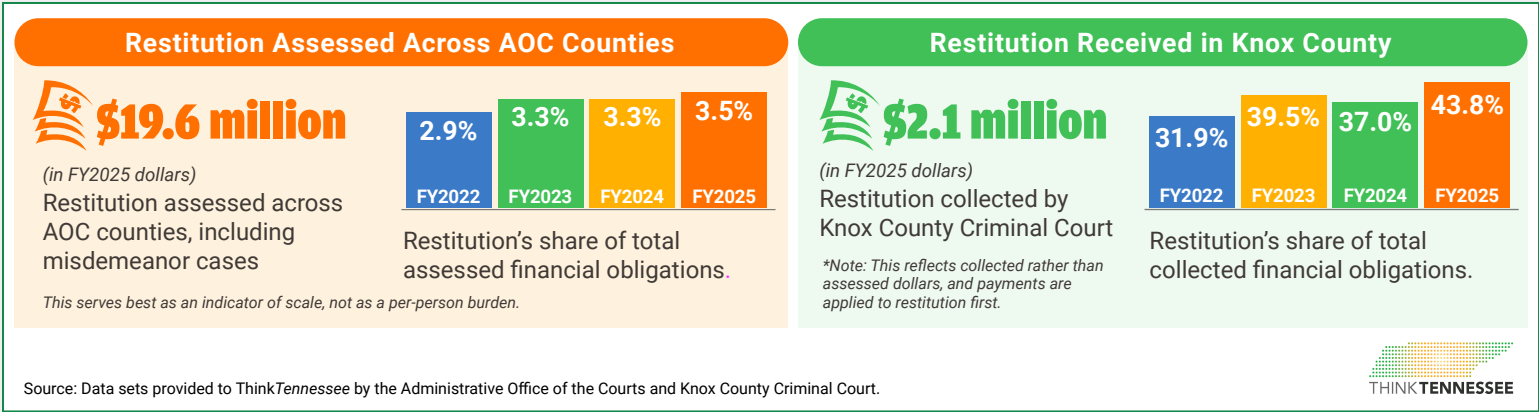
Across the state, assessed restitution totals millions of dollars.

Courts can order restitution to compensate victims for financial losses resulting from an offense. While restitution is not ordered in every felony case, individuals who owe restitution must satisfy those obligations before becoming eligible to have their voting rights restored.

Available data provide some insight into the scale of these obligations. Courts across the 86 counties reporting through the AOC, which also include misdemeanor cases, assessed \$19.6 million in restitution from FY2022 through FY2025 (in 2025 dollars). Restitution represents a relatively small but growing share of all financial obligations assessed in these counties, increasing from 2.9% in FY2022 to 3.5% in FY2025.⁷

Data from Knox County offer a different window into restitution: the county reports total amounts collected rather than assessed. Over the same time period, collected restitution totaled \$2.1 million and accounted for 37.6% of total collected financial obligations.⁸

These figures cannot be used to estimate a statewide total of restitution assessed or collected. The 87 counties with restitution data report it differently, and Davidson and Shelby counties do not collect restitution through their criminal courts. Yet, available data show that across the state, restitution represents millions of dollars in financial obligations, a significant share of which may remain outstanding.

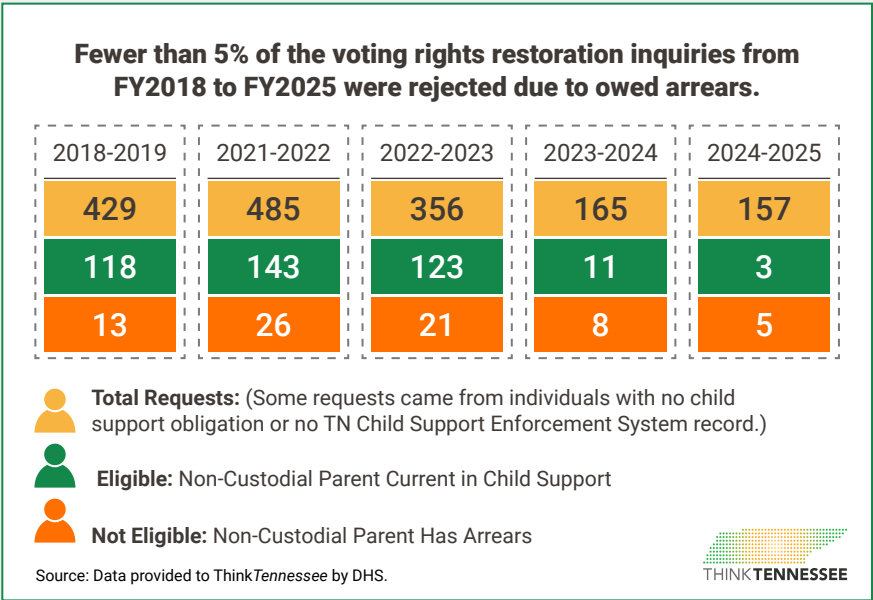


Few voting rights restoration inquiries involve child support arrearages.

Until 2020, child support obligations continued to accrue while Tennesseans were incarcerated because incarceration was considered as "voluntary unemployment." As a result, Tennesseans who entered incarceration current on child support could leave with substantial accrued debt. Since 2020, individuals sentenced to, or serving more than, 180 days in incarceration can request to modify their child support order for the duration of their incarceration.⁹

According to the Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS), they received 1,592 inquiries—a small fraction of the over 215,000 Tennesseans who have completed their sentences and may be eligible to seek restoration—between 2018 and 2025. Of those, just 4.6% (73) involved Tennesseans with arrearages.¹⁰

Importantly, these data cannot tell us how common child support arrearages are among the broader population potentially eligible for restoration, or whether financial obligations may discourage some Tennesseans from beginning the restoration process.



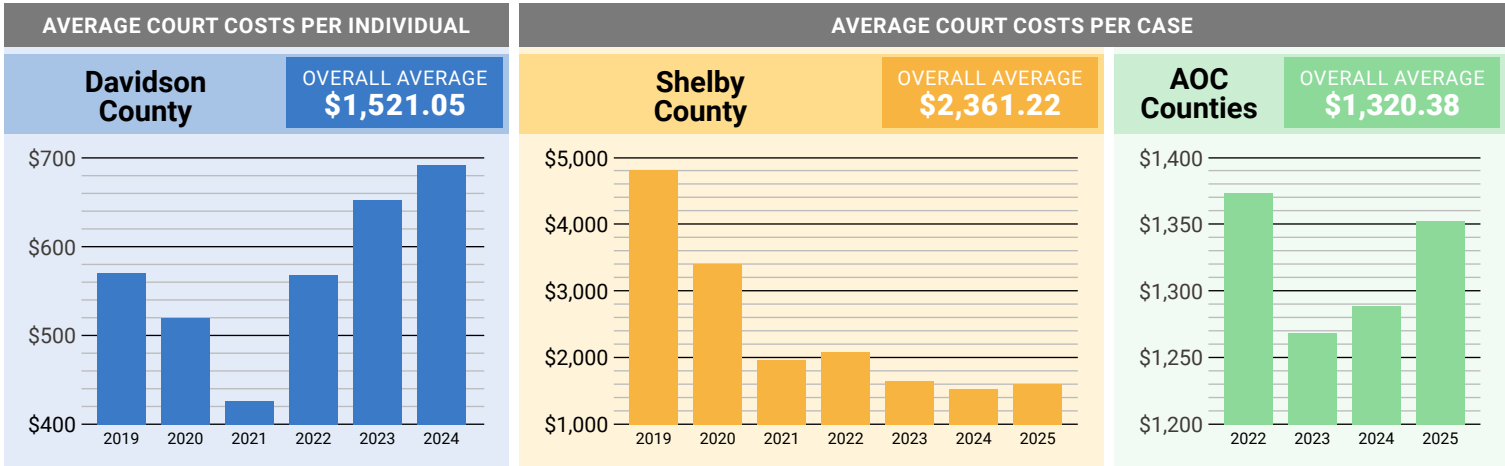


Estimates of average court costs exceeded \$1,000.

Until March 2026, Tennesseans seeking to restore their voting rights were required to pay outstanding court costs before becoming eligible. While no longer part of the restoration process, court costs had been a potentially significant financial barrier for some Tennesseans.

Differences in how counties collect and report court cost data limit direct comparisons and prevent a precise statewide estimate. Yet available data show that court costs can add an average of more than \$1,000 in financial obligations. From FY2019 through FY2024, average court costs in Davidson County were approximately \$1,521 per individual, while Shelby County averaged approximately \$2,361 per case through FY2025.¹¹ Across the 86 counties reporting through the AOC, average court costs were approximately \$1,320 per case (felony and misdemeanor) from FY2022 through FY2025.¹²

Court debts per individual person or case varied across counties, averaging over \$1,000 annually.



Case-level estimates are not as precise as individual-level debts because they factor in all disposed cases, some of which may have no, or only low, assessed court costs.

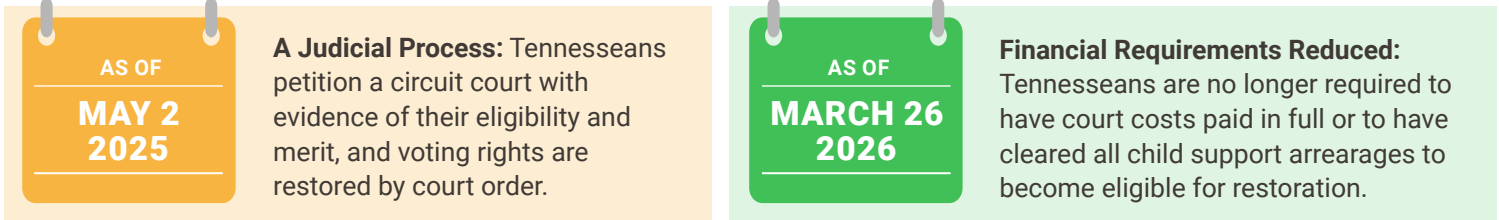
Source: Data provided to ThinkTennessee by Davidson County Criminal Court, Shelby County Criminal Court, and the Administrative Office of the Courts.



Voting rights restoration now requires court approval and a filing fee.

From 2006 to 2025, voting rights were restored administratively—Tennesseans submitted a Certificate of Restoration (COR) to election officials to verify they had met the eligibility requirements.¹³ In 2025, it became a judicial process—Tennesseans petition a court and demonstrate they have met the requirements and that they also merit having their voting rights restored.¹⁴

The process for restoring voting rights in Tennessee has changed in recent years.



Source: Tenn. Pub. Acts (2025, Ch. 298) and (2026, Ch. 605).

Though the previous administrative process was complicated, it was designed to restore voting rights upon eligibility, and there was no financial cost. The new judicial process provides a formal avenue for court review, but unlike previously, Tennesseans must also demonstrate that they merit restoration and pay a filing fee.

Court costs to file petitions seeking voting rights restoration vary by county and range from \$155.75 to \$314.50.

The base fee for a petition to restore citizenship rights in 2026 is \$150. It will increase by \$25 for the following two years (on January 1, 2027 and 2028) to a total of \$200.¹⁵ However, petition costs vary by county, reflecting variations in litigation taxes and other county fees. Of the 44 counties with publicly available fee schedules, total filing fees for a petition for restoring voting rights (citizenship restoration) range from \$155.75 (Hancock) to \$314.50 (Rutherford).¹⁶

The cost for filing a petition to have voting rights restored ranges from \$155.75 to \$314.50.

Hancock	\$155.75	Unicoi	\$204.50	Shelby	\$216.50	Cumberland	\$252.50
Putnam	\$161.50	Bledsoe	\$209.50	Blount	\$220.00	Maury	\$254.50
Weakley	\$179.50	Davidson	\$209.50	Dyer	\$220.50	Montgomery	\$254.50
Sullivan	\$183.50	Hamblen	\$209.50	Williamson	\$222.50	Robertson	\$254.50
Grainger	\$184.50	Union	\$210.50	Wayne	\$224.50	Sumner	\$259.50
White	\$186.50	Warren	\$212.00	Anderson	\$227.50	Hamilton	\$264.50
Franklin	\$199.50	Bedford	\$214.50	Campbell	\$237.00	Knox	\$264.50
Hawkins	\$199.50	Henry	\$214.50	Wilson	\$242.00	Perry	\$266.50
Loudon	\$199.50	Lewis	\$214.50	Cocke	\$249.50	Sevier	\$299.50
Macon	\$199.50	Cheatham	\$215.00	Coffee	\$249.50	Roane	\$301.50
Morgan	\$199.50	Meigs	\$216.50	Greene	\$252.00	Rutherford	\$314.50

Filing fee for citizenship rights restoration petitions

- \$150-\$200
- \$200-\$250
- Over \$250

*The remaining counties do not have filing fees posted online



Source: Court petition-filing fee schedules obtained from county websites.

Two out of three Tennesseans convicted of a felony since 1996 have completed their sentence, and recent changes to Tennessee's restoration process and financial requirements have simplified their path to eligibility. With the state trailing most others in voter participation, continued work remains to help every eligible Tennessean get registered and participate.

References

1. Tennessee is among nine states that require individuals to complete additional steps before regaining eligibility. ThinkTennessee. (January 2024). [Tennessee's Voting Rights Restoration Process is Overly Complicated](#).
2. In addition to demonstrating the sentence has been completed and financial requirements have been met, Tennesseans must now also provide the reasons they believe their rights should be restored. Tenn. Code Ann. § 40-29-103 (a)(3) states that restoration petitions must include "satisfactory proof, such as certified records, sworn statements, and other documents or information, necessary to demonstrate to the court that the petitioner is both eligible for and merits having citizenship rights restored."
3. The Tennessee Department of Correction (TDOC) provided data from the Offender Management Information system that includes all unique individuals that were convicted of felonies from January 1996 through September 16, 2025.
4. 2006 Tenn. Pub. Acts, [Ch. 860](#). 2010 Tenn. Pub. Acts, [Ch. 1115](#).
5. 2026 Tenn. Pub. Acts, [Ch. 605](#).
6. Court cost and restitution data from the 86 counties who report General Sessions court data to the Administrative Office of the Courts include both cases related to felony and misdemeanor charges. Those 86 counties do not similarly code court costs – there are multiple variations of costs across counties in the data file – limiting a universal analysis. Additionally, we received data from criminal courts in Davidson, Knox, and Shelby counties, all of which include felony charges only, but each of which differs from the other in some way. Davidson County provides individual-level data on amounts assessed, Shelby County provides annual totals of amounts assessed, and Knox County provides annual totals of amounts received.
7. Administrative Office of the Courts. (2025). Court costs assessed by year, FY2022-FY2025. Data set provided to ThinkTennessee.
8. Knox County Criminal Court data provided to ThinkTennessee. As of January 1, 2022, money paid into courts is first allocated to restitution owed to the victim, if any, and then credited toward payment of litigation taxes, then costs, and then fines. Tenn. Code Ann. § 40-24-105(a).
9. 45 C.F.R. § 302.56(c)(3) (2026). Federal law requiring states to provide that incarceration may not be treated as voluntary unemployment in establishing or modifying child support orders. Tennessee Department of Human Services. (May 11, 2020). [Tennessee Revises Child Support Guidelines to Better Serve Families](#).
10. Tennessee Department of Human Services, Child Support Services Division, email correspondence with ThinkTennessee, [October, 2025].
11. Davidson County Criminal Court. (2026). Court costs assessed by year, FY2019-FY2024. Data set provided to ThinkTennessee. Shelby County Criminal Court. (2025). Court costs assessed by year, FY2019-FY2025. Data set provided to ThinkTennessee.
12. Administrative Office of the Courts. (2025). Court costs assessed by year, FY2022-FY2025. Data set provided to ThinkTennessee.
13. ThinkTennessee. (January 2024). [Tennessee's Voting Rights Restoration Process is Overly Complicated](#).
14. 2025 Tenn. Pub. Acts, [Ch. 298](#).
15. 2025 Tenn. Pub. Acts, [Ch. 486](#).
16. A survey of county court websites conducted in June 2026 revealed 44 counties with publicly available fee quotes for filing a petition to restore citizenship rights. The remaining 51 counties did not have the information posted publicly.

THINKTENNESSEE

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