

Racial & Ethnic Disparities in the Criminal Justice System

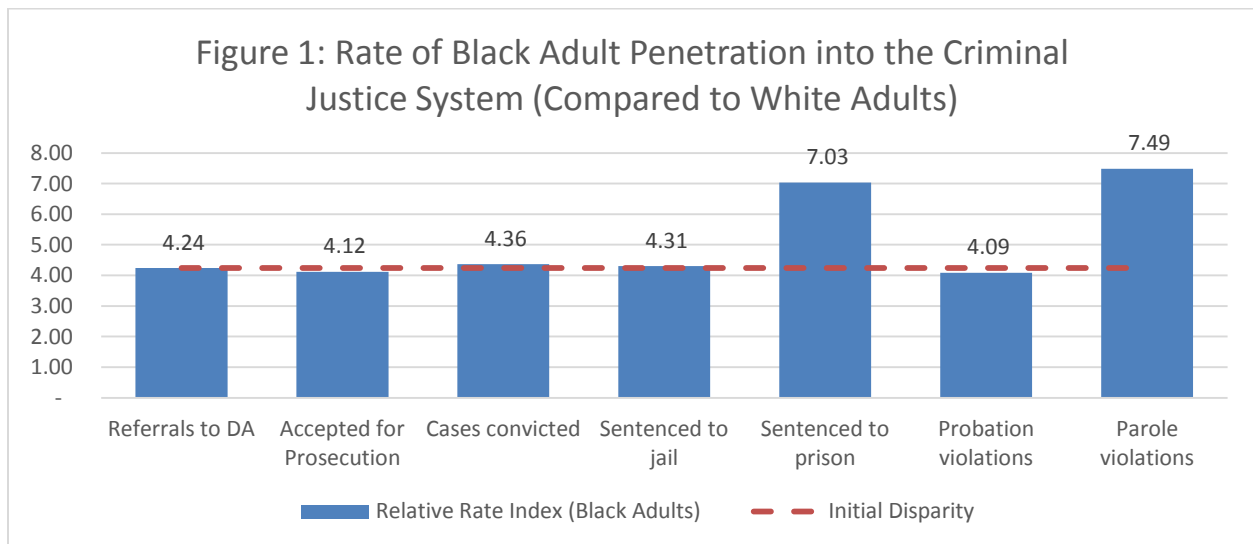
One of the most troubling and persistent issues in the criminal justice system is the overrepresentation of people of color, particularly African Americans. The criminal justice system is not equitable, and Multnomah County is no exception. At each point in the system, from initial contact (e.g., arrest) through case prosecution and sentencing, county data indicate communities of color are represented in the system at a greater rate than their white counterparts. Data analyzed through SJC planning resulted in a comprehensive report which summarizes Racial and Ethnic Disparities (RED) at each decision point. The report identifies which points in the system have the largest disparity, allowing criminal justice leadership and the community the opportunity to explore methods to decrease RED. Multnomah’s SJC strategies support this exploration through extensive engagement with communities most impacted by disparity, as well as reducing involvement in the criminal justice system due to behavioral health concerns or probation/parole violations.

Examining Racial and Ethnic Disparity in Multnomah County’s Criminal Justice System

In Multnomah County, we found significant disparity in the experience of white adults versus adults of color, particularly in the black population. There is some overrepresentation of other racial groups and the strategies identified to address overall disparity will impact all populations. However, black adults experience the highest level of disparity at every point in the criminal justice process. Examining the causes of that disproportionate representation will aid in developing solutions resulting in the greatest overall reduction in disparity.

Using a standard statistical method of identifying racial and ethnic disparity (see page 2 for further information), we compared the representation of black adults in the criminal justice system with the white population.¹ As **Figure 1** highlights², there is significant disparity for black adults in that they are:

- Four times more likely than white adults to enter the criminal justice system;
- Seven times more likely to be sentenced to prison; and
- Seven times more likely to receive a parole violation resulting in additional jail time.



¹ If black adults are represented at a rate equal to the white population, the RRI is “1”. A higher RRI signifies greater representation and a RRI of less than “1” indicates lower representation compared to white adults.

² Figure 1 compares criminal justice system data to the overall Multnomah County Population. The full RRI report also provides comparisons to the prior decision point to illustrate RED as individuals move through the criminal justice system.

Multnomah County Strategies to Reduce Disparity

Recognizing the disparity in initial contact, sentencing, and parole/probation violations, Multnomah County developed SJC strategies that begin to focus on reducing RED. Criminal justice leaders, in concert with the community, will continue to develop more specific methods of reducing RED and to monitor the data and track impact. For example, the county proposes to develop a RED dashboard that provides real-time information on who is currently in the criminal justice system.

Beyond continuous monitoring, criminal justice leadership and the community will develop systematic approaches to addressing disparity. For example, leaders will proactively involve communities of color, particularly in the black community, to provide insight on the experiences of these populations with the criminal justice system. Through true community engagement, Multnomah County will gain an understanding of the causes of the initial disparity, why it persists throughout the system, and how to reduce it.

Measuring Racial and Ethnic Disparity

Multnomah County took a data-driven approach to identifying persistent equity issues in the criminal justice system. As shown in **Figure 2**, Multnomah County's adult population is 76% white and 23% people of color. Although black adults comprise only 5% of the general population, they are 27% of the jail population, which constitutes a disproportionate percentage of black adults in the jail.

On the surface, this disproportionality raises questions about equity. It does not, however, capture the relatively higher impact that disproportionate engagement in the criminal justice system can have on communities of color. Calculating the rate per 1,000 individuals in the population is the first step in identifying relative impact. For example, for every 1,000 black adults in the community, 9.16 are in jail, which is the highest of any racial category.⁵

To further compare the experiences of communities of color to the white population, we calculate a Relative Rate Index (RRI) where white adults are the reference group compared to the experiences of other racial categories.⁶ A 1-to-1 RRI would indicate the rate per 1,000 for that community is equal to the white population. Values above "1" indicates higher representation, while values lower than "1" indicate less representation (as seen in **Figure 1**).

| Figure 2: Population by Race | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Race | Population³ | Adults in Jail⁴ |
| White | 475,446 (76%) | 730 (62%) |
| Hispanic | 56,765 (9%) | 102 (9%) |
| Asian/ Pacific Islander | 50,892 (8%) | 19 (2%) |
| Black | 34,161 (5%) | 313 (27%) |
| Native American | 6,041 (1%) | 17 (1%) |
| Total | 623,305 | 1,181 |

³ Source: United States Census (Adult population of Multnomah County for 2014)

⁴ Source: Multnomah County Sheriff's Office (Snapshot taken on June 30, 2014.)

⁵ Calculation is: $(313/34,161) \times 1,000 = 9.16$

⁶ Calculation is: Rate per 1,000 black adults divided by rate per 1,000 white adults ($9.16 / 1.54 = 5.95$)