

Racial Disparities in Youth Commitments and Arrests

Between 2003 and 2013 (the most recent data available), the rate of youth committed to juvenile facilities after an adjudication of delinquency fell by 47 percent.¹ Every state witnessed a drop in its commitment rate, including 19 states where the commitment rates fell by more than half.² Despite this remarkable achievement, the racial disparities endemic to the juvenile justice system did not improve over these same 10 years. Youth of color remain far more likely to be committed than white youth. Between 2003 and 2013, the racial gap between black and white youth in secure commitment increased by 15%.

Both white youth and youth of color attained substantially lower commitment rates over these 10 years. For white juveniles, the rate fell by 51 percent (140 to 69 per 100,000); for black juveniles, it fell 43 percent (519 to 294 per 100,000). The combined effect was to increase the commitment disparity over the decade. The commitment rate for Hispanic juveniles fell by 52 percent (230 to 111), and the commitment rate for American Indian juveniles by 28 percent (354 to 254).

As of 2013, black juveniles were more than four times as likely to be committed as white juveniles, American Indian juveniles were more than three times as likely, and Hispanic juveniles were 61 percent more likely.

Another measurement of disproportionate minority confinement is to compare the committed population to the population of American youth.³ Slightly more than 16 percent of American youth are African American. Between 2003 and 2013, the percentage of committed juveniles who were African American grew from 38 percent to 40 percent. Roughly 56 percent of all American youth are white (non-Hispanic). Between 2003 and 2013, the percent of committed juveniles who were white fell from 39 percent to 32 percent.⁴

As discussed below, growing disparities in arrests have driven the commitment disparities. Between 2003 and 2013, white juveniles arrest rates (already half that of

black juveniles) fell by 49 percent while black juveniles arrest rates fell by 31 percent. While other levers in the juvenile justice system (such as processing in juvenile courts) are replete with disparate outcomes, most of those points of contact are no more disparate than they were 10 years prior. The growth in commitment disparities begins with the growth in arrest disparities.

CURRENT RACIAL COMMITMENT DISPARITIES

AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMITMENT DISPARITIES, 2013

The black/white racial disparity in commitment is calculated by comparing the rate of African American commitments (the frequency of committed African American juveniles divided by the total number of African American juveniles) to the rate of white juveniles commitments.⁵

Nationwide, African American juveniles were more than four times as likely to be committed to secure placements as were white juveniles. In six states (Utah, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Rhode Island), the black/white disparity was more than ten-to-one, meaning that African American juveniles were more than 10 times as likely as white juveniles to be committed to secure facilities.