

## News & Features

### Disparities persist in Minnesota's justice system

by [Brandt Williams](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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*A new report says African Americans in Minneapolis are 15 times more likely to be arrested for low-level offenses like loitering, or for traffic offenses like driving without a valid license. The majority of those arrests do not lead to convictions. (Photo by David McNew/Getty Images)*

**Racial disparities continue to exist in Minnesota's criminal justice system, according to the latest report from the Council on Crime and Justice, a private non-profit research group that has been studying the issue. The council discussed the causes, effects and solutions to racial disparities in the criminal justice system at a conference in Minneapolis on Wednesday. The Council says the topic of disparities is a key one with violent crime increasing in Minneapolis and Saint Paul.**

Minneapolis, Minn. — Since 2000, the Council on Crime and Justice has conducted 17 studies on racial disparities in Minnesota's criminal justice system. Researchers for the council wanted to know why people of color, especially African-Americans, are more likely than white Minnesotans to be arrested and incarcerated.

Council director Tom Johnson began the conference by summarizing the council's research.

"At the end of last year, African-Americans made up roughly 32 percent of the prison population of Minnesota. And at the same time they made up a little over four percent of the general population statewide. That difference defines a racial disparity," he said. Johnson says while the data is transparent, the reasons for the disparities are not. He says the studies show individual and institutional racial bias are only part of the problem.

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For example, crime rates among communities are not equal. Johnson says African-Americans are more likely to be arrested and convicted of homicide than whites because the prevalence of homicide in black communities is higher than it is in white communities.

The council's research also focuses on how people enter the criminal justice system, through contact with law enforcement officers. In the case of low-level offenses, like loitering or lurking, police officers have the discretion whether to cite someone or let them go with a warning.

"In one of our studies we found that when presented with that decision, the police were fairly even between African-Americans and whites, give them a citation or put them under arrest. The disparity is in the proportion of people they actually engage to make that decision," Johnson said. "It's just that so

many more African-Americans are in that position to have a police officer make that decision about them."

A panel discussion followed Johnson's presentation. The members of the panel, discussed the Council's research and offered their own ideas as to why the disparities exist. Bill Martinez is a senior commander with the St. Paul Police Department. He says much of the time police officers are responding to calls from citizens. Martinez says his officers are trained to focus on criminal behavior, not on the race of a suspect. But he says sometimes the nature of the calls reflect racial bias.

"I was at a community meeting the other night where I was talking to a young woman. And she said, 'I saw these guys walking down the street and I knew they were up to no good. There were two Latinos and an African-American.' And I said, what made you think they were up to no good?," Martinez said. "'Well, they just weren't. You don't see them very often in my neighborhood.'"

The discussion of racial disparities comes during a spike in violent crime in Minneapolis. A recent string of homicides and shootings has caused residents to call on the police to clamp down on criminal activity by stepping up surveillance and arrests. The council's researchers say such efforts can add to racial disparities because they lead to more police contacts with people of color.



Assistant Minneapolis Police Chief Sharon Lubinski says the crime numbers have led some residents to pressure the police to get tough and not worry about the civil rights of criminal suspects.

"We can't do that," she said. "We've really got to listen to the community, but make sure that we're following the constitution in taking police action, but within people's rights. Because if we fall short of that, then we're just succumbing to the problem ourselves."

[Tom Johnson](#)

The council has compiled a number of recommendations designed to reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system. For example, the council will push for a law that would allow a person's record be hidden from all but law enforcement officials if they have been charged with a crime, but not convicted.

Tom Johnson says just having a criminal charge on a record can make it hard for one to find work or housing, because that information can be found in background checks.