



Research Bulletin

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Examining incarceration trends among minority youth in Illinois

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The racial makeup of those who come in contact with the criminal justice system has long been of interest to researchers and policymakers. Overrepresentation of minorities, primarily African Americans, has become apparent in the nation's prisons and received much attention. Disproportionate representation of minorities has also extended to the juvenile justice system and correctional facilities for youth.

At different stages of the juvenile justice system, from initial contact with law enforcement to incarceration in a secure facility, decisions are made that may impact overrepresentation of minority youth. One

Illinois study found that in counties throughout the state minorities were overrepresented at each decision point in the juvenile justice system. Factors that may ultimately influence confinement include differential police policies and practices, location of offenses, varying behaviors of minority youth, differential reactions of victims to offenses committed by individuals of different racial or ethnic groups, or racial bias within the justice system.¹

This *Research Bulletin* examines race of juveniles committed by the courts to Illinois youth centers. Although the data may not contribute to conclusions as to the causes of overrepresentation or underrepresentation of minorities and ethnic groups, they can aid in the development of appropriate responses to reduce disproportionate minority confinement.

Admissions to IDOC Juvenile Division

The Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) collects data from each juvenile at the point of admission into its juvenile division. Each youth is examined in regard to medical, psychological, and social conditions, including substance abuse issues, and school and vocational histories. The IDOC intake assessment aids staff in determining the placement of juveniles into one of seven Illinois youth centers.

IDOC juvenile admission data was examined in this *Research Bulletin* and will provide information on juveniles committed by the courts to IDOC's Juvenile Division in state fiscal year 2004 (FY04), which runs from July 1, 2003, to June 30, 2004.

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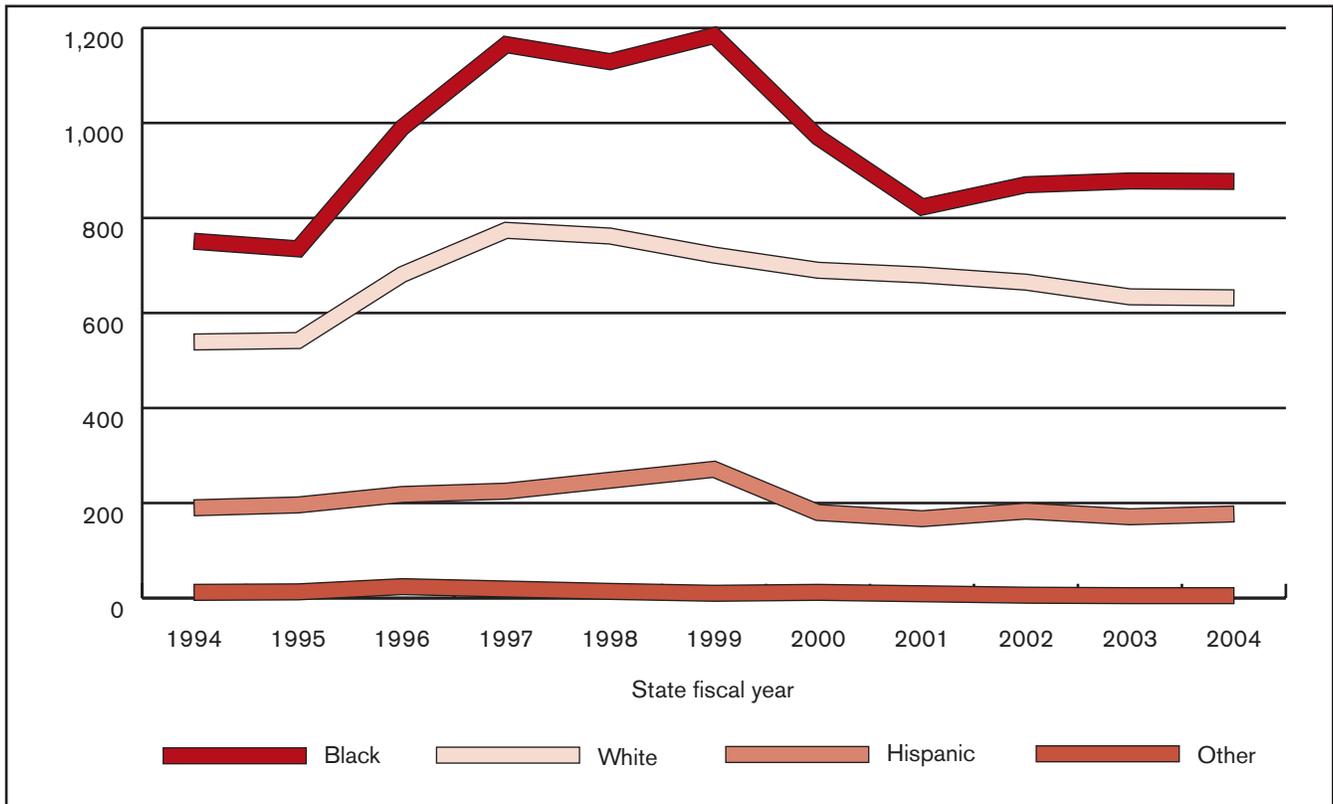
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Figure 1
Juvenile IDOC commitments by race, state fiscal years, 1994 to 2004



Source: Illinois Department of Corrections

Total admissions

In FY04, 3,106 juveniles were admitted to an Illinois youth center. Juveniles may be admitted either by a court commitment or for a parole violation. Court commitments include juveniles entering a youth center for an initial sentence and recommitments to IDOC. Courts may also recommend that a juvenile enter an Illinois youth center to undergo a court evaluation. Judges may then decide to commit a juvenile based on the recommendations of a court evaluation. This report studied the 1,691 youth who were court committed.

Court commitments

The court can commit delinquent juveniles who are at least 13 years of age and under 17 years of age to an Illinois youth center, and they may remain there until they are 21. Juvenile commitments cannot be longer than the incarceration term of an adult for the same act. Juveniles are given an indeterminate sentence. The sentence, based on many factors, may be extended depending on the youth's progress.

Of all FY04 admissions, 54 percent were sentenced by the courts and admitted to an Illinois youth center statewide. Almost half (47 percent) of all court commitments were initial commitments and 4 percent were discharged and recommitment. More than one-third of juveniles (36 percent) were sent to IDOC for a court evaluation and 13 percent returned to IDOC following a court evaluation.

Race of juvenile court commitments

Illinois courts committed 52 percent black, 37 percent white, 10 percent Hispanic, and less than 1 percent Asian and American Indian youth to IDOC's Juvenile Division in FY04. A 17 percent increase was seen in the number of black juveniles entering a youth center from the courts between state fiscal years 1994 and 2004. In FY04, the courts committed 38 percent more black juveniles than white juveniles.

Illinois experienced an increase in juvenile court commitments to corrections from 1995 to 1999. This followed a national trend of increased juvenile violence and unfounded predictions of continued violence. U.S.

juvenile violent crime fell for six straight years from 1994 to 2000.³

Court commitments by race and offense type

Black youth comprised the largest racial group committed to an Illinois youth center for crimes against a person (57 percent) and drug offenses (81 percent) in FY04. White youth comprised the largest group committed for property and sex offenses, at 51 percent and 62 percent respectively.

Black youth were five times more likely than white youth to be committed for a drug offense. Eighty-one percent of black youth were committed to IDOC for a drug offense, while only 16 percent of white youth served time for the same type of crime.

Disproportionate minority confinement

Efforts have been made in recent years to reduce disproportionate minority confinement in the state's juvenile justice system. Disproportionate minority confinement occurs when the proportion of minority youth detained or confined in secure facilities exceeds the minority group's proportions in the general population. Minority overrepresentation is often a product of actions occurring before correctional commitment, such as decisions by law enforcement, prosecutors, and judges.

It is estimated that while minority youth account for about one-third of the U.S. juvenile population, they comprise two-thirds of the juvenile detention and corrections population.⁴ According to the U.S. Census Bureau, while minority youth accounted for an estimated 40 percent of the Illinois juvenile population in federal fiscal year 2004, 63 percent of youth committed to IDOC were minorities (The federal fiscal year runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30).

In Illinois, black youth were overrepresented in IDOC court commitments, while white, Hispanic, and Asian-American youth were not. Black youth made up 18 percent of the population and 52 percent of the court commitments to IDOC's Juvenile Division in FY04. American Indian youth also were slightly overrepresented.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention developed the relative rate index, a measure of disproportionate minority confinement. The index

compares the rate at which minority youth are involved at a stage of the juvenile justice process to the rate at which a reference group is involved at the same stage of the process. In Illinois, the appropriate reference group is white.

When working with small numbers and percentages the formulas used to assess minority representation can result in large indices that are difficult to interpret. A "one percent rule" was used in calculating the indices discussed in this section. If a county's minority group population was less than one percent, a relative rate index was not calculated for that minority group in that county (*Figure 2*).

In FY04, the relative rate index for black, Hispanic, and Asian juveniles committed to an Illinois youth center was 4.27, 1.01, and 0.03, respectively. Black youth were 4.27 times, or 427 percent, more likely to be committed to a youth center than those who were white. Hispanic youth were as likely as white youth to be committed to a youth center. Asian youth were committed at a rate that was 3 percent less than the rate of white youth.

Conclusion

Minority youth confined in correctional facilities in Illinois exceeded the minority groups' proportions in the general population in FY04. While minorities accounted for 42 percent of the population, 63 percent of youth committed to a youth center by Illinois courts were minorities. While black youth make up 18 percent of the Illinois population, 52 percent were court committed to a youth center in FY04. In addition, black youth were more than four times more likely than white youth to be committed to a youth center.

Notes

¹ Poe-Yamagata, Eileen and Michael A. Jones, "And Justice for Some," Building Blocks for Youth (2000).

² Bridges, George S., Heidi, M. Hsia, and Rosalie McHale.

³ Butts, Jeffrey, Travis, Jeremy, "The Rise and Fall of American Youth Violence: 1980 to 2000," The Urban Institute (2002): 2-3.