

Disproportionate Minority Contact in the American Juvenile Justice System: Where are We after 20 Years, a Philosophy Shift, and Three Amendments?

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For the past 20 years, youth of color have been overrepresented in the American juvenile justice system. Over that same period, the philosophy of the juvenile court has changed from a more informal and rehabilitative model to a more formal and punitive model, and minority youth have experienced disparate and more severe outcomes than their majority counterparts. Starting in 1988, 3 significant policy changes were made via amendments to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 mandating that states address disproportionate minority contact (DMC). The author examined the philosophy shifts in juvenile justice, as well as systemic and DMC policy changes, and their effects on the current status of minority overrepresentation. Recommendations are presented for social workers to address disproportionate minority contact.

For over 20 years the United States has struggled with the overrepresentation of minorities in the juvenile justice system (Bishop, Leiber, & Johnson, 2010; Kempf-Leonard, 2007; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Congress has sought to address this overrepresentation with Disproportionate Minority Confinement/Contact (DMC) amendments to the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency and Prevention Act (JJDP; P.L. 93-415). At the same time, the philosophy of juvenile justice has shifted from a more informal, rehabilitative system to a more formal, punitive system (Griffin, Torbet, & Szymanski, 1998). What effect, if any, have these policy and philosophy changes had on minority

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disparity in juvenile justice? This article describes these shifts, efforts to address disproportionate minority contact within the juvenile justice system, and continuing challenges for practitioners and policymakers.

PHILOSOPHICAL SHIFTS IN AMERICAN JUVENILE JUSTICE

Industrialization of the United States led to a concentration of individuals in metropolitan settings where crimes, including those committed by youths, burgeoned. It was during this period that social reform began to take shape and to focus on juvenile delinquency (Platt, 1969; Roberts & Brownell, 1999).

The Early, More Informal, and Rehabilitative Philosophy

In the 19th century, separate facilities for children who had been convicted of crimes, called *training schools* or *houses of refuge*, were deemed necessary for two reasons: to keep children from becoming corrupted by adult inmates and to ensure that they were not punished but were instead rehabilitated. Soon, however, these houses of refuge were unable to hold all youth offenders and unable, as well, to deter future delinquency and, by late in the 19th century, many houses of refuge were plagued with riots, fires, and mass violence (Mennel, 1972).

As a result, progressive reformers founded the first juvenile court in Cook County, Illinois, in 1899. Like the houses of refuge, this court was created to reform young people rather than to punish them. The first juvenile court also used the principle of *parens patriae* or the state serving as parent when parents were unable to fulfill that role or when the child proved too disobedient (Yablonsky & Haskell, 1988).

During this era, courts minimized the importance of rules of procedure and evidence and instead weighed the child's individual needs, before establishing *parens patriae* for intervention into the child's life with a court-decided, appropriate treatment (Faust & Brantingham, 1974; Platt, 1969). In 1921, Judge Waite of the Minneapolis Juvenile Court said that,

The best elements of socialized justice—relaxed, scientifically informed and humane decision making, could be combined with the best elements from the traditional legal process—rigorous fact-finding based on time-proven rules, conducted in such fashion that justice would be served to perfect the juvenile court as a socio-legal institution (p. 339).

By the 1950s, a constitutionalist argument emerged, contending that the social welfare juvenile court was supplanting children's legal rights with potential benefits of only questionable value. The concern was that the informal guidelines and judicial discretion of the juvenile court were contributing to the incarceration of youth without due process. The constitutionalists thus

began using the courtroom to argue the constitutionality of juvenile justice under the 14th Amendment. In the *Kent v. United States* decision filed in 1966, Justice Abe Fortas stated, “There is evidence, in fact, that there may be grounds for concern that the child receives the worst of both worlds: that he gets neither the protections accorded to adults nor the solicitous care and regenerative treatment postulated for children” (383 U.S. 541).

A More Formal and Punitive Philosophy

The philosophy of the juvenile court then began to shift from individualized, informal processes to more standardized formal processes. When a young person commits some type of wrongdoing, community members, school officials, and law enforcement officers have several informal options: ignore the behavior, warn the youth, contact his/her parents, make a referral to a service-providing agency, or divert the youth into a justice program without formal adjudication. Early in the history of juvenile justice, more formal options were not yet available. Formal options include issuing a citation/petition with a formal charge and then releasing the youth into his/her parents’ custody or detaining the youth in a juvenile detention facility. The more serious the offense, the less likely informal options will be used.

Following an increase in juvenile homicides and violent crimes from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, a few high-profile and well-publicized violent juvenile offenses, and the resulting public outcry; the concept of rehabilitating youthful offenders gave way to punishing them. In their 1996 book, *Body Count: Moral Poverty...and How to Win American's War Against Crime and Drugs*, Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters noted that because of the “moral poverty” of youth and their parents, America is now faced with juvenile “super-predators.” Juvenile justice scholar Barry Feld (1999) described the change in philosophy by stating,

In the mid-to-late 1980's, serious youth crime and, especially, gun violence and homicide escalated at unprecedented rates among young urban black males. Analysts attribute the unique age- and race-specific crime pattern to the confluence of broader structural changes including the deindustrialization of cities, the racial concentration of poverty and single-parent households, and the inner-city crack cocaine epidemic. In turn, media depictions of gang and gun violence by minorities—“if it bleeds, it leads”—fanned public fears and provided political impetus to “criminalize” more youths and punish them as criminals and to adopt more-punitive juvenile justice policies. In the span of half a decade, nearly every state amended its waiver laws in response to the real or perceived escalation of urban minority youth violence. These statutory modifications shifted juvenile courts’ foci from treatment to punishment, from offender to offense, and fostered convergence between the jurisprudence of the juvenile and criminal justice systems. (p. 241–242)

By the end of the 20th century, close to 20 states had shifted the focus of their juvenile courts from rehabilitation to punishment and offender accountability (Griffin et al., 1998).

SYSTEMIC AND POLICY CHANGES IN REGARD TO DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY CONTACT

As these philosophical shifts were happening to American youthful offenders, policy reactions and changes to the juvenile justice system occurred as well. Justice policy was formulated, analyzed, and amended and this affected the system, as well as the youth within the system.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974

In 1974, the federal government enacted the Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act (JJDP), which stipulated that in order for states to receive federal juvenile justice funding, they would have to meet three mandates: (a) discontinue holding juvenile status offenders¹ in secure detention or confinement; (b) create separate confinement facilities for youth, in order to protect juveniles and guard them from further corruption by adult offenders; and (c) in situations where children must be placed in an adult facility, state placements must maintain sight and sound separation such that the youthful offenders could not be held next to adult cells, share dining rooms, or any other common spaces (P.L. 93-415).

Disproportionality in the Juvenile Justice System

At this time, the JJDP was new and although demographic data were collected, little attention was yet paid to minority overrepresentation. The race/ethnicity data collected by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) defined minorities as African Americans, American Indians, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics (OJJDP Regulations 28 CFR Part 31).

In 1983, minorities comprised 32% of the juvenile population in the United States but 53% of youth in secure detention and 56% in juvenile correctional centers (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Ira Schwartz, testifying in March of 1987 before the House subcommittee on Human Resources, stated that,

Minority youth now comprise more than half of all the juveniles incarcerated in public detention and correctional facilities in the United States and despite widely held perceptions to the contrary there is recent research showing that minority youth do not account for a substantially disproportionate amount of serious crime. However, minority youth

stand a much greater chance of being arrested than white youth, and once arrested, appear to be at a great risk of being charged with more serious offenses than whites who are involved in comparable levels of delinquency (Schwartz, 1989, p. 5).

The First Two JJDP Amendments

The United States Congress responded to Schwartz's testimony and the issue of minority overrepresentation by amending the JJDP Act of 1974 to address minority overrepresentation in the juvenile justice system. Overrepresentation means that the percentage of minority youth in the juvenile justice system exceeds the percentage of minority youth in the general population. Over 20 years ago, in 1988, a fourth mandate was added to the JJDP requiring states to assess and address the disproportionate number of minorities in juvenile secure confinement. This amendment states that,

In accordance with regulations which the Administrator shall prescribe, [the state plan] shall . . . address efforts to reduce the proportion of juveniles detained or confined in secure detention facilities, secure correctional facilities, jails, and lock ups who are members of minority groups if such proportion exceeds the proportion such groups represent in the general population (Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974, as amended [P.L. 93-415, Section 223 [a] [23]).

In 1991, minorities still comprised 32% of the total juvenile population, yet they now made up 65% of the juveniles in secure detention and 69% of those in juvenile correctional centers (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997; Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). And according to the OJJDP, states' evaluations of minority overrepresentation revealed higher rates of the probability of minority incarceration than majority incarceration in every state studied (Roscoe & Morton, 1994). Disproportionate Minority Confinement Fact Sheet #11 reported that in one particular state, for Caucasian males the estimate was that 1 in 64 would be taken into juvenile justice custody before his 18th birthday, compared to 1 in 13 African American males (Roscoe & Morton, 1994).

Congress further amended the JJDP in 1992. This second amendment added a financial penalty for states. It elevated the mandate to address and reduce disproportionate minority confinement (DMC) to a core requirement of the JJDP, meaning that 25% of each state's Formula Grant allocation could be withheld from states found not to be in compliance (P.L. 102-586).

The Third Amendment

The percentage of minorities in the U.S. population aged 10–17 rose to 34% in 1997, and youth of color continued to be overrepresented in the juvenile

justice system. Minorities made up 62% of the youth in secure detention and 67% of the youth in juvenile correctional centers (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). As a result, in 2002, the JJDPA was amended for a third time. The 2002 amendment changes the DMC language from disproportionate minority confinement to disproportionate contact (DMC hereafter will refer to *disproportionate minority contact*). This change acknowledged minority overrepresentation in stages prior to incarceration and recognized that systemic influences might also need to be examined in order to reduce disproportionality in the system.

As outlined by the OJJDP, for states to comply with the requirement to address DMC, they must participate in five sustained efforts: (a) identify the extent to which DMC exists, (b) assess the reasons for DMC if it exists, (c) develop an intervention plan to address these identified reasons, (e) evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to address DMC, and (f) monitor DMC trends over time (Pope, Lovell, & Hsia, 2002).

THE CURRENT STATUS OF DISPROPORTIONATE MINORITY CONTACT (DMC) INITIATIVES

In the years since Ronald Reagan, the U.S.'s judicial branch of government has experienced a philosophy shift in juvenile justice, from a rehabilitative model to a punitive model. As this shift has occurred, minority overrepresentation has been exacerbated. The legislative branch of government has responded by identifying the problem of disproportionate minority contact in the juvenile justice system and amending the JJDPA in order to reduce the disparity. Yet, after two decades and changes in juvenile justice philosophy as well as changes in DMC legislation, the proportion of minority youth who come into contact with the juvenile justice system still exceeds the proportion of minority youth in the general population.

Continued Overrepresentation of Minorities

According to the 2006 Juvenile Offenders and Victims National Report, the "overall percent of cases detained for blacks was 1.4 times that for whites and 1.2 times that for other races. The greatest disparity between blacks and whites or other races was in the likelihood of detention in drug cases—the proportion for blacks was more than 2 times that for whites and nearly 2 times that for youth of other races" (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 169).

Michael Leiber (2002) analyzed state and federal efforts to address DMC, and because few states had reached the evaluation phase and even fewer had reached the monitoring phase, he examined states in the identification and assessment phases, using data collected from the late 1980s through 1996. Leiber found that in 2001, minority youth were overrepresented in

every state reviewed and at all decision points: “In fact, minorities were on average greater than 2 to 2.5 times their percentage of the at-risk youth population (i.e., secure detention, 2.63; secure corrections, 2.64; adult jails, 2.01; adult lockups, 2.16; transfers to adult court, 2.55; and probation, 2.03). The only exception was for arrests, but minority youth were still on average overrepresented (1.38)” (Leiber, 2002, p. 10).

Despite the lack of standardization in data collection and analysis, 32 of the states/jurisdictions studied reported that race/ethnicity effects existed independent of criminal record/offense/involvement, whereas 12 states attributed DMC solely to legal factors (i.e., severity of the crime or number of prior misdemeanors; Leiber, 2002).

A mixed-method study of 2,233 African American and Caucasian males in Virginia used severity of the crime, number of prior misdemeanors, family structure, geotype (urban, suburban, or rural locale), grade repeated, income level, and race in a logistic regression model with incarceration as the dependent variable. Race was the strongest predictor of the likelihood of incarceration, followed by having repeated a grade in school, the number of prior misdemeanors, and finally, the severity of the crime (McCarter, 2009). These findings were triangulated by qualitative data from interviews with youth and families and representatives from the juvenile justice system.

Similarly, an Ohio study found that race affected detention decisions and then detention status affected decisions to incarcerate youth (Dunn, Cernkovich, Perry, & Wicks, 1993). Race also had indirect effects in Michigan, where race was correlated with family status and then family status was correlated with detention (Bynum, Wordes, & Corley, 1993). These studies contribute to the notion of a cumulative effect of race beyond risk and protective factors on juvenile justice processing and sanctions.

Efforts to reduce DMC are still hampered by most states’ inability to consistently and comprehensively collect and analyze the data generated throughout their juvenile justice systems. In Illinois, confinement data are kept in the 16 counties that operate secure detention centers and the one state agency that runs the juvenile correctional center. Adjudication and probation data, however, are kept in 101 separate county court systems, and arrest level data are kept in thousands of local police jurisdictions (FACJJ, 2006).

The Federal Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice’s 2006 Annual Report (2006) cited these challenges to the DMC initiative:

- *Factors contributing to DMC have still not been identified in a number of states.* Several states have not been able to conduct adequate research on DMC, due in part to the conceptual understanding, data collection, and analysis skills necessary.
- *Incomplete and inconsistent data systems hinder DMC efforts.* The information collection systems in many states are not standardized across the state and/or do not interface easily.

- *Evaluation of DMC efforts and monitoring of DMC trends must be ongoing.* Without sustained and targeted DMC resources, states are unable to continue to collect and analyze these data in order to establish trend data.
- *Reducing DMC requires not only programmatic components, but also entire system change.* Resources are often allocated to prevention and intervention programs for minority families, but change is also needed in the juvenile justice system itself.
- *Mechanisms to assess and respond to DMC issues need to be institutionalized.* Until work on DMC is institutionalized as part of the juvenile justice system, reacting to legislative amendments and the philosophy shifts of the courts will not reduce disproportionate minority confinement (p. 12).

Youth of color come into contact with the U.S. juvenile justice system at a disproportionate level compared to Caucasian youth, and states are experiencing varying rates of failure and success in reducing minority overrepresentation. Efforts are needed to learn from the handful of success stories and to incorporate their methods in more states, locales, and agencies. Washington State provides one such example.

Washington State: Where the DMC Initiative Has Been Successful

Following the JJDP Act's DMC initiatives, in 1988, Washington State's Governor's Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee (GJJAC) began to catalog demographics and characteristics of youth who came into contact with their juvenile justice system (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004). The state of Washington is one of only three states that have attempted to collect and analyze DMC data annually. Over the past 15 years, Washington has conducted research on DMC, engaged the public in this process, enacted legislation to ensure policy and procedure changes, and developed programmatic and administrative initiatives at state and county levels. Washington data suggest that the state's comprehensive efforts to address DMC have been reduced disproportionately at most stages of the juvenile justice system (Hsia et al., 2004).

As with every state participating in the Formula Grants funding process, in the 1980s Washington's minority youth were also more likely than Whites to be referred, detained, prosecuted, adjudicated, and confined in the juvenile correctional system (Hsia et al., 2004). In 1993, the Washington legislature passed a bill (HB 1966) requiring the Department of Social and Health Services to collect data and study the level of DMC in juvenile courts and correctional centers (Hsia et al., 2004). A subsequent study found that probation officers regularly portrayed Black youth differently from White youth in written court reports. Often the officers attributed the delinquency of Black youth to their attitudes or personality traits, whereas they attributed the

delinquency of White youth to factors in their social environment such as dysfunctional families and negative peer influences (Bridges & Steen, 1998). Publication of this study “triggered extensive debate about DMC in Washington state, including a firestorm of publicity about racial disparities in the juvenile courts” (Hsia et al., 2004, p. 21).

In response to the data, the public debate, and the studies’ recommendations, the Washington legislature enacted four laws aimed at reducing disparities in Washington’s juvenile justice system (ESHB 1966, HB 2319, HB 2392, and ESHB 3900; Hsia et al., 2004). Mandated by these laws, the state implemented programs and policies to reduce DMC by enhancing cultural competence, evaluating DMC and formulating intervention strategies at the local level, using standardized risk assessments, and sustaining state support for local DMC efforts (Hsia et al., 2004).

Washington’s success in reducing DMC was achieved through the combined efforts of University of Washington researchers by contributing empirical evidence on the degree and point of contact of DMC; the Governor’s Juvenile Justice Advisory Committee by providing leadership, funding, technical assistance, and support; the Washington State legislature by establishing standards for decision-making at the various stages as well as mandating state agencies to monitor and report on DMC; and the court and justice personnel by completing the training, monitoring, reporting, and advocating for youth.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

Over 20 years and three DMC amendments have passed since minority overrepresentation was identified as a problem in the juvenile justice system in the United States. Meanwhile, the philosophy shifts away from an informal system to a more formal system and from rehabilitation to punishment have disproportionately affected youth of color. Although a few states have made significant strides in reducing DMC, the vast majority have not. Despite having elected our first African American president, this social justice issue is likely to continue, with African American youth still receiving harsher sanctions than their Caucasian counterparts. What are the recommendations for forensic social work research, policy, and practice? Building upon research to date and the success in Washington State, social workers can reduce disproportionate minority contact by:

- improving and augmenting the data collected and research,
- bolstering the leadership and support regarding DMC,
- formulating and advocating for further legislation to address DMC,
- facilitating dialogue with justice personnel, and
- increasing their commitment to this vulnerable population.

Policymakers and practitioners need more empirical evidence upon which to base decisions and interventions (Cabaniss et al., 2007; FACJJ, 2006; Kempf-Leonard, 2007; Leiber, 2002). The DMC initiative has increased the number of studies investigating minority overrepresentation, but the data are still woefully incomplete and inconsistent. Moreover, according to the OJJDP, the research should be updated every three years (*Disproportionate Minority Contact Technical Assistance Manual*, 2006). Forensic social workers working in corrections may be in the role of providing interventions, but they should also assist in collecting these necessary data.

In America in 2009, race continues to be a sensitive and controversial topic. States, court officials, court service unit personnel, police officers, and so on, are often more willing to examine the effects of race on justice processing when the focus is on the offender, the offender's family, offense, or prior record than when the focus is on potential bias on the part of the processing, system, or justice officials. Social workers are uniquely trained and skilled in facilitating these discussions. With leadership and support on this social issue, states may be able to reduce DMC.

Policy practitioners can advocate for the courts to judge legal factors instead of extralegal factors (like race/ethnicity) so that the number of youth coming into contact with the justice system is proportional to their representation in the general population. The DMC initiative has brought this issue to the justice and policy forefronts and state legislatures need to respond. The Federal Advisory Committee on Juvenile Justice's 2006 Annual Report noted that of the 37 states that responded to their questionnaire, more than half ($n=28$) cited disproportionate minority contact as their top concern (FACJJ, 2006).

There is evidence that the more stakeholders involved in this DMC conversation, the better (FACJJ, 2006). Washington State's dialogue included justice employees, university researchers, state lawmakers, and members of the governor's advisory committee (Hsia et al., 2004). Research in Virginia included juvenile court judges, Commonwealth's attorneys, public defenders, police officers, juveniles, and their families (McCarter, 2009). Social work caseworkers can assist stakeholders in conversations that include race and ensure that the dialog can be meaningful, respectful, and culturally sensitive.

Finally, the continuation of disproportionate minority contact in the American juvenile justice system calls for social work's attention and commitment. The injustice of minority overrepresentation suggests that we should examine not only the social welfare, but also the society that regards minority offenders and minority children with disproportionality. Engaging in forensic social work research, policymaking, advocacy, and practice to reduce DMC is a start. Giving our youth equal opportunities for education, healthcare, and success, however, may lead to a society that builds and values its schools and health care systems more so than its prisons.

NOTE

1. Status offenses apply only to juveniles and include behaviors such as curfew violations, truancy, possession of tobacco or alcohol, running away from home, and so on.

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