

Report finds pervasive racial bias in US juvenile justice system

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A report commissioned by the Washington DC-based Youth Law Center and a coalition of civil rights and youth advocacy groups has concluded that minority youth are treated much more harshly than white youth at each stage in the US criminal justice system.

The study, conducted by the National Council on Crime and Juvenile Delinquency, used federal and state arrest and court data. It found that black and Hispanic youth are much more likely than white youth who commit comparable crimes to be referred to juvenile court, be detained, face trial as adults and go to jail.

The costs of the study were underwritten by the US Department of Justice and leading charitable organizations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundations and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

When minority and white youth were charged with the same offenses, black youth who had no prior arrest record were six times more likely to be incarcerated than white youth with similar backgrounds. Hispanic youth were three times more likely to be incarcerated. Black youth were 48 times more likely than white youth to be sent to juvenile prison for drug-related offenses.

The data does not support the claim that the disparities are simply the result of the higher arrest rate for minority youth. The study found that while 71 percent of youth arrested are white, 60 percent of youth sent to prison are black. In 1997, of 7,400 young people sent to prison, three-quarters were minorities.

The issuing of the report comes at a time when states are pushing for ever-harsher treatment of young offenders. Last year Congress enacted a juvenile justice bill that provides for the trying of youth age 14 and older in adult court for violent crimes. Youth caught carrying a gun in a school zone could receive a five-

year prison sentence.

Recently the state of Michigan tried Nathaniel Abraham in adult court on murder charges for a shooting that took place when he was 11 years old. He was found guilty and sentenced to a juvenile detention center, although the judge could have sentenced him to life imprisonment.

The exposure of gross inequality in the treatment of young arrestees sheds a light on the calls by Congress and the Clinton administration for ever tougher measures to fight crime. While a spate of high-profile shootings in largely middle class suburban and rural schools has served as the basis for the most recent youth crime legislation, these measures have impacted disproportionately on the most oppressed sections of the working class, in particular minority and immigrant youth.

Like so many other studies documenting injustice and inequality in the United States, the Youth Law Center report received scant publicity. Articles appeared in the *New York Times* and other newspapers and the topic was then dropped. For its part, the coalition that sponsored the study drew few conclusions. It has advanced as its main proposal a call for \$100 million to be given to the Justice Department by Congress to “reduce disparities.”



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