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LOCAL NEWS



Civil rights advocates are calling on local officials to reform the criminal justice system in Multnomah County where a new report finds an overrepresentation of people of color at every stage in their journey through arrests, prosecutions and sentences.

Locked Up by Race

Unfair outcomes found across the board

A new report shows what many people already suspected: People of color are negatively impacted in greater numbers relative to whites at every stage in the journey through the criminal justice system in Multnomah County.

The disparity is especially hard on local African Americans, who are 320 percent more likely than whites to have their crimes accepted for prosecution, 500 percent more likely to spend time in jail, and 600 percent more likely to be sentenced to prison, according to the Racial and Ethnic Disparities report.

The findings were produced by an independent researcher at the request of Multnomah County and released Thursday with some of the participants of the study, which included leaders of the American Civil Liberties Union, Metropolitan Public Defender, Oregon Justice Resource Center and Partnership for Safety and Justice.

The data was collected by those working within the criminal justice system. It was funded by a \$150,000 grant through the MacArthur Foundation's Safety and Justice Challenge.

"People are being punished in Multnomah County for being black," said Jann Carson, associate state director of the ACLU. "While we aren't surprised to see this evidence of racism in our criminal justice system, we are disappointed."

The participating organizations are calling for action to be taken to change the clearly biased outcomes the report reveals.

"We want to see measurable goals in place to

address discrimination by the system," said Lane Borg, executive director of Metropolitan Public Defender Services, "and we want senior leadership in Multnomah County and the city of Portland taking personal responsibility for fixing the problem."

Bobbin Singh, executive director of Oregon Justice Resource Center, believes this report should be just the start of monitoring the extent of the racial disparities in the county's criminal justice system.

"What this report says very clearly is that if you are black and in Multnomah County, you will be punished more often and severely when intersecting with the criminal justice system," said Singh. "All county and city stakeholders must take ownership of this systemic discrimination and the profound disparities reported."

He said it's important to determine how "discretion is used within the criminal justice system, particularly in parts of the system where decisions are made behind closed doors and without much oversight."

The report also confirms the kind of racial disparities found in a 2011 report on youth tried as adults in Oregon.

"Communities of color deserve a system that is fair, just and unbiased," added Andy Ko, executive director of Partnership for Safety and Justice. "The problem is systemic and has long-lasting consequences for individuals and our communities."

The non-profit organizations lending their support pledged to continue to act as watchdogs to ensure change happens. The county will be able to complete for a second round of funding to help execute some reform plans over the next two years, with the next round of grants offering between \$500,000 and \$2 million annually.