

# News

## The High Costs of Disparities for People of Color in Multnomah County

By Lee Van der Voo and Nick Budnick  
InvestigateWest/Pamplin Media Group

**F**or everything from jaywalking to driving without a license, it pays to be white in Oregon if you run afoul of the law.

What you really don't want to be is black.

For example, littering fines for African-Americans are nearly double those imposed on whites, according to an analysis of cases filed in state courts from 2005 to 2016. Transit fare violations? Those fines, too, are more than doubled if you're black.

Our review of the past dozen years of court records shows that white residents charged in relatively minor cases in Multnomah County — those with a single count — paid a median fine of \$181, while African-American defendants paid \$261.

Since 2005, that disparity added up to about \$5.6 million.

If you look at fines related to all cases, African-American defendants in Multnomah County paid about \$21.5 million more than they would have if their fines had been equal to those levied on white defendants.

"These are the hidden injustices built into the justice system," said Jo Ann Hardesty, president of the Portland Branch of the NAACP and a former state legislator.

### Living black in Multnomah

When people discuss racial disparities in the criminal justice system, they often focus on cops. Yet, as evidenced by the gap in fines (which are outside



PHOTO BY JAIME VALDEZ

Jo Ann Hardesty speaks at the March for Justice and Equality on Jan 28, 2017.

the control of police), obstacles to obtaining equal justice in Multnomah County — and throughout Oregon — are seen at every tier of the criminal justice system.

Prosecutors, the courts and even state legislators play a role in perpetuating the disparities, but it's logical to zero in on police, who make the first — and very public — contact with people who end up in our courts and jails.

In Multnomah County, ticket by ticket, arrest by arrest, African-Americans are charged three to 30 times as often as white residents for everything from pedestrian and transit fare violations to drug charges and crimes related to interactions with police.

For black people in Multnomah County, unequal treatment in the criminal justice system is nothing new.

Lauretta Reye Austin, 22, described being hassled by a cop while waiting at a MAX station.

Teressa Raiford, 46, and a leader of Don't Shoot PDX, said it was only after talking to white girls that she learned police didn't know all young kids by name — just the black kids.

Teressa Raiford went from being a pro-cop anti-gang activist to leading the group Don't Shoot PDX. She says she learned from an early age that her skin color merited special attention from police.

Red Hamilton, 40, a Milwaukie resident whose family lives in North Portland, says her brother has been stopped by police while walking to work.

"They ask him stuff like, 'Oh, where you going? You look familiar,'" Hamilton said, "criminalizing him by just his skin tone."

And then there's Kevin Jones' story from last July.

The co-founder of an arts group, Jones was parked in the loading dock outside the Artists Repertory Theatre in downtown Portland, talking with his production assistant, when an officer activated his squad car lights and began questioning him — the officer's hand either on his gun or resting very near it, his partner standing further back.

Jones, who was then directing a play on racial profiling for the August Wilson Red Door Project, asked what the

basis for the stop was, pointing out that he was parked legally and rented space at the theater.

Eventually, the police were persuaded and drove away. But the officer's initial response to his questioning struck Jones as out of line. "If you're going to have an attitude, let me have your driver's license," he recalled the cop saying.

Such tales are the reality of life inside these numbers: Of the 202 types of offenses for which there was adequate data to compare — everything from mail theft to murder to escape from prison or custody — African-American residents in Multnomah County were charged at higher rates than whites for all but five types of crimes. And in 80 percent of those crimes, they were charged at two or more times the rate of whites.

### Stark gap for drug crimes

The biggest disparities are seen in drug crimes. Researchers have found that African-Americans use most drugs, including powder cocaine, at lower rates than whites. The only drug black people consume at a higher rate is crack cocaine.

Yet black residents in Multnomah County were charged at a rate seven times that of whites for all drug cases. In minor cocaine cases, mostly single counts of possession, the rate was 30 times that of whites.

African-American residents comprise just 7 percent of Multnomah County's population, including people of mixed race, but make up nearly a third of charges for interfering with a police officer.

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