

PRESS RELEASE

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Groundbreaking National Study Finds Racial Disparity in Colorado Counties in the Imprisonment of African Americans for Drug Crimes

DENVER: A new report released today by the Justice Policy Institute of Washington DC finds that 97% of the nation's large-population counties imprisoned African Americans for a drug offense at a higher rate than whites. The report documents racial disparities in the use of prison for drug offenses in 193 of the 198 counties that reported to government entities.

"The Vortex: The Concentrated Racial Impact of Drug Imprisonment and the Characteristics of Punitive Counties" is the first study to examine the relationships between these sociodemographic structures and the specific annual rate at which people are admitted to prison for drug offenses, and the first to localize the racially disparate impact of drug imprisonment at the county level.

"This important report shows how pervasive racism is in the enforcement of drug laws. It's not an anomaly when the same findings are reported in 97% of the nation's larger counties," said Christie Donner, Executive Director of the Colorado Criminal Justice Reform Coalition.

This report found that counties with higher poverty rates, larger African-American populations and larger police or judicial budgets imprison people for drug offenses at higher rates than counties without these characteristics. These relationships were found to be independent of whether the county actually had a higher rate of crime.

Major findings include:

- While tens of millions of people use illicit drugs, prison and policing responses to drug behavior have a concentrated impact on a subset of the population. In 2002, there were 19.5 million illicit drug users, 1.5 million drug arrests, and 175,000 people admitted to prison for a drug offense.
- While African Americans and whites use and sell drugs at similar rates, African Americans are ten times more likely than whites to be imprisoned for drug offenses.
- Of the 175,000 admitted to prison nationwide in 2002, over half were African American, despite the fact that African Americans make up less than 13 percent of the U.S. population.
- There is no relationship between the rates at which people are sent to prison for drug offenses and the rates at which people use drugs in counties. For example, although

Rockingham County, NH, has a larger percent of its population reporting illicit drug use, Jefferson Parish, LA, sent more people to prison for a drug offense at a rate 36 times that of Rockingham.

- Higher county drug prison admission rates were associated with how much was spent on policing and the judicial system, higher poverty and unemployment rates, and the proportion of the county’s population that is African American.

“Laws—like drug laws—that are violated by a large percentage of the population are particularly prone to selective enforcement,” says Phillip Beatty, co-author of the study. “The reason African Americans are so disproportionately impacted may, in part, be related to social policy, the amount spent on law enforcement and judiciary systems, and local drug enforcement practices.”

Colorado Summary

Data from seven counties in Colorado were included in this research project: Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, El Paso, Jefferson and Larimer. In each of these Colorado counties, the study found significant racial disparity in the incarceration of African Americans for a drug offense. Adams County had the highest racial disparity of the Colorado counties profiled and incarcerates African Americans for a drug offense at 24 times the rate of whites.

“Unfair drug policies being enforced by a racist, classist system have led to overrepresentation of people of color in our criminal justice system. It does not surprise me to see that African Americans in the City and County of Denver are being imprisoned for drug offences at 19 times the rate of our White counterparts, and as a young, African American Denver native I have experienced the discrepancy between the way Whites and Blacks are treated by the system.” said Cheyenne Hughes, racial justice organizer with the Colorado Progressive Coalition.

The report also found that Denver had one of the highest incarceration rates for drug offense in the nation at 147.39 people per 100,000, a rate 3-5 times that of other metro counties. “It’s ironic”, said, Christie Donner, “that Denver voters have now twice said they want substantial drug policy reform and the Denver criminal justice system continues to lock up thousands of people a year for a drug offense.”

Vortex Report-Colorado data summary

	Adams	Arapahoe	Boulder	Denver	El Paso	Jefferson	Larimer
Drug admission rate to prison*	46.51	29.6	11.10	147.39	44.32	36.86	24.94
African American drug admission rate to prison*	402.40	145.44	27.23	638.04	174.04	155.60	65.47
White drug admission rate to prison*	17	13.71	4.93	32.75	23.28	26.27	17.66
Poverty rate	9.7%	7%	8.2%	14.5%	9.2%	6.1%	8.4%
% of population that is African American	3.9%	9.7%	1.3%	12%	8.1%	1.5%	1.2%
Unemployment rate	6.4%	5.7%	5.7%	6.8%	6.2%	5.5%	4.7%
Per capita spending on law enforcement	\$372.25	\$236.55	\$188.90	\$267.58	\$186.73	\$191.68	\$165.84
Per capita spending on	\$35.28	\$43.93	\$30.62	\$91.63	\$29.66	\$35.45	\$21.39

judiciary							
Ranking by most drug admissions per 100,000 of the 198 counties included in study	94 th	125 th	186 th	12 th	99 th	113 th	143 rd

(*Admission rates to prison are calculated as the number of county residents per 100,000 that are sentenced to prison for a drug offense.)

Adams County: African Americans in Adams County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 24 times the rate of whites.

Arapahoe County: African Americans in Arapahoe County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 11 times the rate of whites.

Boulder County: African Americans in Boulder County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 6 times the rate of whites.

City & County of Denver: African Americans in the City & County of Denver are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 19 times the rate of whites.

El Paso County: African Americans in El Paso County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 7 times the rate of whites.

Jefferson County: African Americans in Jefferson County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 6 times the rate of whites.

Larimer County: African Americans in Larimer County are admitted to prison for a drug offense at 4 times the rate of whites.

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<http://www.justicepolicy.org> – to view the full report and interactive state map

About Justice Policy Institute

The Justice Policy Institute is a non-profit, public policy and research institute dedicated to ending society's reliance on incarceration and promoting effective and just solutions to social problems.