

Racial Disparities Persist in Juvenile Court Placements

by Jeffrey A. Butts

According to data compiled by the National Center for Juvenile Justice and disseminated by the federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the court processing of juvenile delinquency cases has reflected persistent racial disparities since the 1980s.

In 2013 (the most recent data available), juvenile courts across the U.S. disposed an estimated 323,000 adjudicated delinquency cases, compared with 400,000 in 1990 and 600,000 in 2000. The proportion of adjudicated cases resulting in out-of-home placement declined from 31 percent in 1990, to 27 percent in 2000, and 24 percent in 2013.

The majority (more than 90%) of out-of-home placement cases involve “white” youth (including Latino and Hispanic juveniles) or “black” youth. The placement rate varied somewhat by offense type, but placements were consistently more likely in cases involving black youth.

For example, racial differences in the placement of youth charged with person offenses appeared to be decreasing in 2002 and 2003, but by 2013 the gap had returned. In 2013, placement was the disposition for a quarter (25%) of all cases involving white youth adjudicated for person offenses, while 29 percent of person offense cases involving black youth ended in placement.

Placements of youth charged with property offenses declined overall since the 1980s while the gap between white and black placements was nearly unchanged.

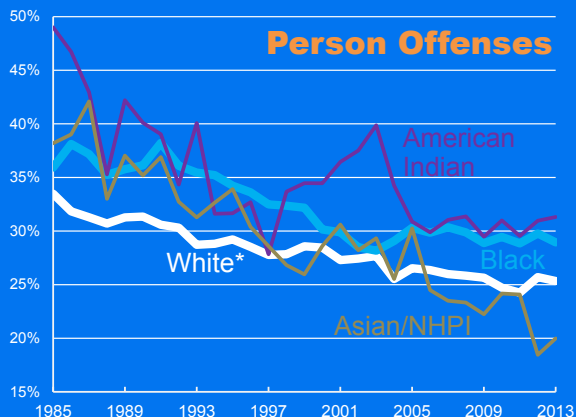
Placements for drug cases, on the other hand, declined more sharply among black youth in recent years. In 2013, 21 percent of black drug cases resulted in placement dispositions—just above the rate of placement for white cases (15%).

Latino youth may be handled by courts in ways more similar to black youth than to non-Latino whites. This could obscure disparities based on ethnicity. At the current rate of change, however, racial disparities in the use of placement for juvenile drug cases may be erased within the next few years.

Percent of Adjudicated Person Offense Cases Resulting in Out-of-Home Placement

White vs. Black		
	White	Black
1985	33%	36%
1990	31%	36%
1995	29%	34%
2000	28%	30%
2005	27%	30%
2010	25%	29%
2013	25%	29%

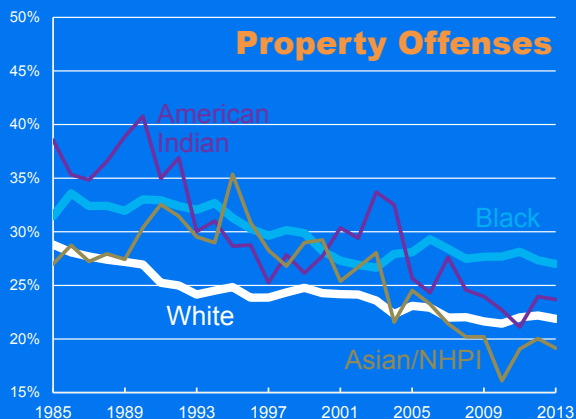
Percent Placed Out-of-Home



Percent of Adjudicated Property Offense Cases Resulting in Out-of-Home Placement

White vs. Black		
	White	Black
1985	29%	31%
1990	27%	33%
1995	25%	31%
2000	24%	28%
2005	23%	28%
2010	21%	28%
2013	22%	27%

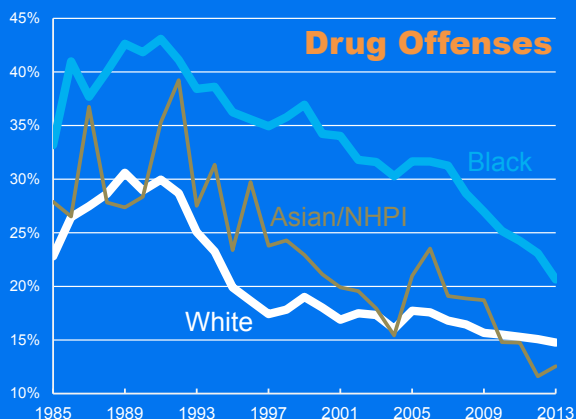
Percent Placed Out-of-Home



Percent of Adjudicated Drug Law Violation Cases Resulting in Out-of-Home Placement

White vs. Black		
	White	Black
1985	23%	33%
1990	29%	42%
1995	20%	36%
2000	18%	34%
2005	18%	32%
2010	16%	25%
2013	15%	21%

Percent Placed Out-of-Home



* “White” includes Latino/Hispanic. “NHPI” indicates Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander. The number of drug cases involving youth of American Indian ancestry was too small to graph reliably.

DATA SOURCE:

Sickmund, M., Sladky, A., and Kang, W. (2015). Easy Access to Juvenile Court Statistics: 1985-2013 Online. Available: <http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/ezajcs/>