Disparities in the Courtroom: Exploring the Influence of Race/Ethnicity and Offense Category on Charge Reductions during Judicial Disposition Making

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Abstract
African American males comprise the most overrepresented group in the juvenile justice system. This disparity has been attributed, in part, to implicit biases. Moreover, family structure and prior court referrals also implicitly impact judicial outcomes. However, the preponderance of African Americans has been found to be attenuated among juveniles with sexual offenses relative to other offense categories. The present study broadens the range of prior research by identifying whether select factors significantly impact the dispositional stage of judicial decision making as measured by charge reduction, testing whether the impact of novel and previously tested predictors differentially predict charge reduction. Demographic characteristics, prior court referrals, and family structure were examined as predictors of charge reduction among juveniles with sexual, violent, and general offenses. Few cases of charge reduction were observed overall, but charge dismissal was found to be fairly common. African Americans were slightly more likely to have their charge reduced, whereas European Americans were more likely to have a charge dismissed. Results indicated that youth with no prior charges who had committed a sexual offense and who came from two-caregiver homes were the most likely to have charge reduction or dismissal. Overall, offense category was a more meaningful predictor of charge reduction or dismissal than race, but race and offense category interactions were also significant predictors. County-level information may explain why juveniles with sexual offenses had the highest rate of charge reduction and charge dismissal, but follow-up research is needed to verify this possibility. Implications of these findings and future directions are discussed.

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duration. In earlier times, courtrooms in many jurisdictions were comprised of all white decisionmakers. This section examines the evidence for racially discriminatory sentencing outcomes for minority defendants in the aggregate. The data that is used simply looks at sentencing outcomes for racial and ethnic groups as a whole, without incorporating any of the factors discussed in following sections, such as type of crime, age and gender of the defendant, etc. Key findings: • There is evidence of direct racial discrimination (against minority defendants in sentencing outcomes) The current study examined the influence of race on juvenile court outcomes across various offense types. This study builds on previous research in the field by utilizing the symbolic threat perspective as a foundation for understanding differences in juvenile disposition. It is hypothesized that the influence of race varies across offense types (misdemeanors and felonies) for the pre-detention and disposition outcomes. Data from a sample of juvenile court referrals from two Midwestern juvenile courts were utilized and partitioned by race. Results were mixed and not always in the hypothesized