

RACIAL AND ETHNIC INEQUITIES IN DRUG-RELATED ARREST PATTERNS

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Background:

Over-policing of people who use drugs in the United States—particularly heightened police surveillance in Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous communities—reinforces institutional violence and negatively impacts physical and mental health. In recent years, advocacy to decriminalize drug use and limit police involvement in drug-related medical emergencies has led to a decrease in drug-related arrests in some settings. We used the state of Rhode Island as a case study to describe trends in drug-related arrests over time and to assess whether changes in drug-related arrest rates were proportional across racial and ethnic groups.

Methods:

We used arrest data from January 2019—June 2024 from the Rhode Island Uniform Crime Reporting Program and 5-year population estimates from the 2023 American Community Survey. We described patterns in arrests due to drug-related violations relative to arrests for all offense types and evaluated changes in drug-related arrest rates over time by race and ethnicity.

Results:

There were 104,352 arrests in Rhode Island during the observation period, 6.6% of which (6,939) were related to drug violations. Average monthly drug-related arrest rates were 4.8 and 1.4 times higher among non-Hispanic Black (38.19 per 100,000) and Hispanic/Latino (11.26 per 100,000) individuals, respectively, relative to white (7.88 per 100,000) individuals. Since 2021, average monthly drug-related arrests have decreased by 41.8%, but the racial and ethnic disparities have persisted.

Conclusion:

Black and Hispanic people who use drugs continue to be overrepresented in arrest data and disproportionately harmed by unjust policing practices. Further investigation is necessary to ensure that reductions in drug-related arrests are not compensated by increases in other offense types. Ongoing efforts to reduce drug-related arrests and other carceral responses to public health issues in the United States must continue to prioritize racial equity.

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