

Declining Populations, Rising Disparities

Exploring Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Safety
and Justice Challenge Communities



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CHALLENGE

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Attempts to reform the criminal legal system are often driven by calls to fix the pervasive racial and ethnic disparities within it. However, these reforms, despite their intentions, can fail to improve or even exacerbate the same disparities they sought to fix.

Since 2015, cities and counties across the country have joined the Safety and Justice Challenge (SJC) to develop and implement data-driven initiatives to reduce jail populations and eliminate racial and ethnic disparities within these jails. While [prior analyses](#) by the CUNY Institute for State & Local Governance (ISLG) highlight major strides toward the first goal of reducing overall jail populations, the findings were less encouraging regarding reducing disparities: in many SJC communities, despite often dramatic reductions in bookings and/or jail populations across all racial and ethnic groups, disparities have persisted or even increased among these groups.

Reducing these disparities continues to be a challenge within SJC communities, indicating that the benefits of SJC's strategies aren't being felt equally among all racial and ethnic groups. This brief seeks to further explore the disparities highlighted in [Measuring Progress](#)—an online tool developed by ISLG that measures jail trends since SJC implementation—and set a course for further analyses.

What do we mean by racial and ethnic disparities?

Disparity occurs when one group experiences a certain outcome at a higher rate than another group.

Booking Relative Rate Index (RRI) is used to measure disparity in jail bookings for a racial or ethnic group compared to White individuals. **RRI values greater than one reflect disparately higher booking rates for the racial or ethnic group of interest, relative to White people.**

Disproportionality occurs when a group is either over- or under-represented.

Jail Population disproportionality compares a given race/ethnicity group's representation in the jail to their representation in the general adult population. A disproportionality ratio higher than one indicates over-representation. **The higher the number, the greater the disproportionality.**

KEY FINDING 1

Falling bookings may lead to widening disparities.

Reducing the number of individuals booked into jail in the first place is a key factor in reducing overall jail populations. With few exceptions, SJC communities saw substantial declines in bookings across all racial and ethnic groups. However, in almost all 24 SJC communities, these declines were more pronounced for White populations, resulting in growing disparities for other racial and ethnic groups (see Table 1).

At the onset of the pandemic, with few exceptions, SJC communities saw substantial declines in bookings across all racial and ethnic groups.

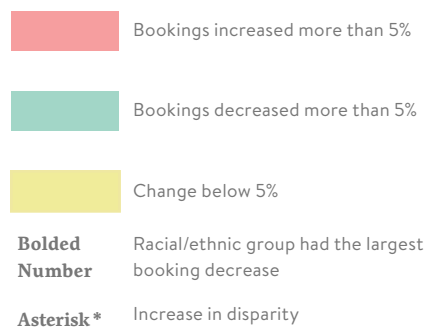
However, in almost all 24 SJC communities, these declines were more pronounced for White populations, resulting in growing disparities for other racial and ethnic groups.

In communities that reported reductions in bookings for Black populations, 89 percent (16 out of 18) saw worsening disparities relative to White individuals. Similarly, 82 percent (9 out of 11) of SJC communities with reductions in bookings for Latinx individuals saw worsening disparities relative to White individuals. Of the four communities that reported reductions in bookings for Indigenous peoples, 75 percent (three out of four) saw corresponding increases in disparities, relative to White individuals.

TABLE 1: PERCENT CHANGE IN BOOKINGS, PRE-SJC TO APRIL 2022

COUNTY	BLACK	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	LATINX	WHITE
Ada	-23%		13%*	-41%
Allegheny	-34%*			-41%
Buncombe	-33%			32%
Cook	-41%*		-41%*	-53%
East Baton Rouge	-35%*		-6%*	-48%
Harris	-1%		-59%	62%
Lake	-30%*		-17%*	-46%
Mecklenburg	-48%*		-30%*	-57%
Minnehaha	-15%	-45%	3%*	-39%
Missoula		-16%*		-35%*
Multnomah	-54%*		-45%*	-59%*
New Orleans	-62%*			-72%
New York City	-70%*		-72%*	-74%
Palm Beach	-18%*		-16%*	-38%*
Pennington	-2%*	-2%*		-31%
Philadelphia	-44%*		-43%*	-59%*
San Francisco	-49%*		-21%*	-54%*
Shelby	-43%*			-41%*
Spokane	-18%*	-16%*	-18%*	-34%*
St. Louis	-50%*			-65%*

Source: Monthly jail data submitted to ISLG by SJC jurisdictions.



KEY FINDING 2

Jail population changes and disproportionality paint a mixed pictures.

While bookings highlight the flow of individuals into the jail, examining overall jail populations allows us to better understand the populations being held in the jail; this is a product of both the people being booked into the jail and the amount of time they spend there. As Finding 1 demonstrates, booking volumes are down nearly across the board, but as Table 2 shows, reductions in the jail population by race and ethnicity has been inconsistent. In a number of communities, jail populations have risen for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous populations since the implementation of strategies to reduce jail populations. While not all these increases in jail population result in increased disproportionality, many do. Mirroring findings among bookings, even in communities that had overall jail population declines for all racial and ethnic groups, disproportionalities have increased in many cases, particularly among Black populations.



TABLE 2: PERCENT CHANGE IN JAIL POPULATION, PRE-SJC TO APRIL 2022

COUNTY	BLACK	INDIGENOUS PEOPLES	LATINX	WHITE
Ada	33%		118%*	-11%
Allegheny	-30%*			-47%
Buncombe	24%*			-2%
Cook	-27%*		-26%	-49%
East Baton Rouge	-38%*		1%*	-52%
Harris	-9%		-35%	70%*
Lake	-12%		35%*	-20%
Minnehaha	-61%*	-6%*	-20%*	-16%
Missoula		-5%		-7%
Multnomah	-18%*		-15%*	-44%
New Orleans	-50%			-59%
New York City	-41%*		-49%	-59%
Palm Beach	-8%*		-13%	-39%
Pennington	-28%*	-27%*		-1%
San Francisco	-43%		-16%*	-33%
Shelby	-2%			3%
Spokane	-2%*	-43%*	-2%*	-28%
St. Louis	-22%*			-43%*

Notes: Charleston, Clark, Lucas, and Milwaukee are removed due to incomplete data.

Percent change derived from counts less than 10 are suppressed.

Source: Monthly jail data submitted to ISLG by SJC jurisdictions.

- Bookings increased more than 5%
- Bookings decreased more than 5%
- Change below 5%
- Number** Racial/ethnic group had the largest booking decrease
- Asterisk*** Increase in disparity

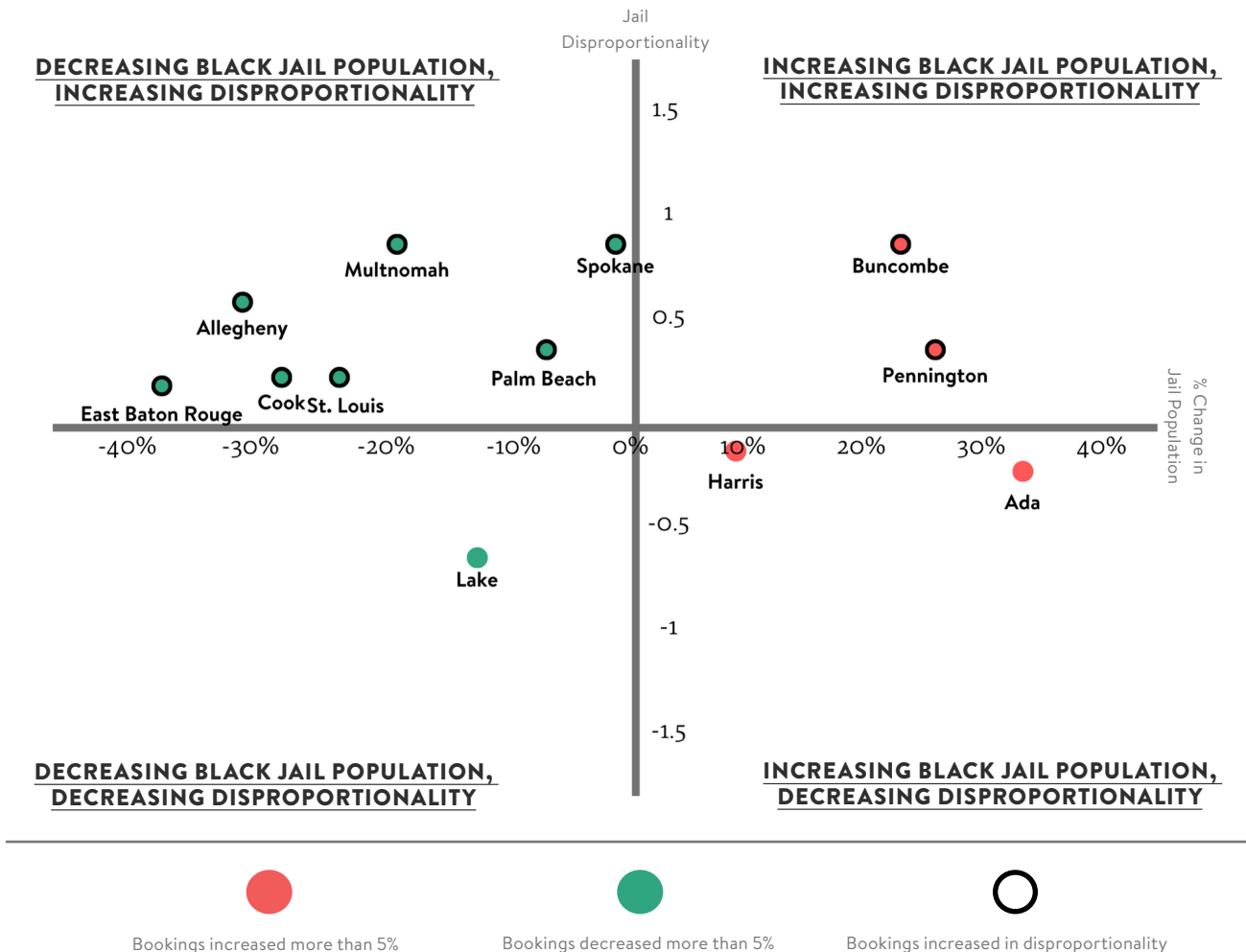
KEY FINDING 3

Decreasing Black, Indigenous, and Latinx jail populations does not necessarily reduce disproportionality.

As shown in above, worsening disproportionality within communities' jail populations can arise whether jail populations of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, or other people of color increased or decreased. This is because a change in disparities over time is a function of how one group changes relative to another; so even if one racial or ethnic group experiences a reduction in their jail population, the disparity may worsen due to another

population declining at a more rapid pace. Looking at jail populations among Black individuals, Figure 1 highlights that both communities with increasing and decreasing jail populations experienced worsening disparities. Two communities saw both increases in the Black jail population and in the disproportionality for this group. Six other communities saw decreases in the Black jail population while still seeing increases in the disproportionality for this group. Similarly, communities with both increases and decreases in the size of the Black jail population saw improvements in disproportionality among this group. data into 2022, check out [Measuring Progress](#).

FIGURE 1: PERCENT CHANGE IN BOOKINGS, APRIL 2019, 2020, AND 2021



Source: Monthly jail data submitted to ISLG by SJC jurisdictions.

TAKEAWAYS

The SJC has seen success in reducing jail populations across the country. However, efforts to reduce jail populations have not consistently yielded reductions in racial and ethnic disparities. While bookings almost uniformly decreased for all racial and ethnic groups since implementation, disparities worsened in many cases due to the outsized reductions in White populations. This suggests that efforts to reduce the number of individuals booked into jail are benefitting some populations more than others. A number of factors could help explain this, including policing practices in Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other communities of color, charge severity, and bail practices.

The pattern is more complex when examining changes in jail populations, where communities have experienced both increases and decreases to jail populations across race and ethnic groups. Since average jail population is a function of both changes in bookings and length of stay, with bookings down, increases to jail populations suggest that length of stay may be increasing for some racial and ethnic groups. Further complicating the picture, widening jail population disparities are seen in communities that have had both increases and decreases to their jail populations.

FUTURE ANALYSES

Future analyses by ISLG will seek to delve deeper into the drivers of these disparities. One crucial lesson learned from this initiative is the importance of designing and implementing strategies in partnership with impacted community members and with the explicit goal of reducing disparities. With this in mind, the MacArthur Foundation has launched a Racial Equity cohort working with community partners to center lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other people of color and engaging with the community with the aim of supporting initiatives and strategies to reduce racial and ethnic disparities.

In the coming months, [Measuring Progress](#) will feature findings related to length of stay and charge severity that will seek to explain why some SJC communities have observed increases in their jail populations, despite often dramatic reductions in bookings and how these changes affect disparities.

For further visualizations that show COVID-19 related and other jail trends, please visit [Measuring Progress](#). With this tool, you can view these disparities across communities and look more deeply into these disparities at the individual site-level. For additional COVID-19 jail trends, check out our previously released [COVID-19 brief](#).



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This report was created with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of the Safety and Justice Challenge, which seeks to reduce overincarceration by changing the way America thinks about and uses jails. Core to the Challenge is a competition designed to support efforts to improve local criminal justice systems across the country that are working to safely reduce over-reliance on jails, with a particular focus on addressing disproportionate impact on low-income individuals and communities of color. More information is available at www.SafetyandJusticeChallenge.org.