

# Reducing Racial Inequality in Crime and Justice: Science, Practice and Policy

## Public Health and Health System Approaches

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine convened an expert committee to review and assess existing evidence on racial differences in crime and criminal justice involvement and make evidence-driven policy and research recommendations to reduce racial disparities in the criminal justice system. The expert committee authored the report, *Reducing Racial Inequality in Crime and Justice: Science, Practice and Policy*, a comprehensive study to understand how racial inequality is perpetuated by the criminal justice system and interacts with broader societal forces, and what should be done about it.

The committee concluded that policymakers do not have to choose between public safety and racial equity because many of the policies designed to address racial inequalities also make communities safer. Instead, the committee identified two evidence-informed approaches designed to reduce racial inequities and advance public safety: (1) implementing policy reform at every stage of the criminal justice system itself—from policing and courts to corrections, and community supervision; and (2) investing in community-based and social reforms that improve public space, reduce neighborhood inequality, and alleviate concentrated poverty.

### LINK BETWEEN HEALTH, VIOLENCE, AND RACIAL INEQUALITIES IN CRIME AND JUSTICE

Public safety is a key indicator of public health. Research shows that the mere exposure to violence can have detrimental effects on one's physical and psychological well-being. The more violence that is present in a community, the more likely it is that its residents are experiencing higher rates of chronic health problems—

this applies to both the victims of violence and the people who commit violent acts.

Given the connection between public health and violence, researchers have explored interventions that target unsafe environments to advance health and safety while also minimizing the harms of contact with the criminal justice system. By adopting a public health framework for addressing safety, policymakers can tackle some of the root causes of racial inequality that persist in the United States. The report outlines promising areas of public health and health care policy that could reduce racial disparities in violence, crime, and criminal justice system contact.

### PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH SYSTEM INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

**Linking Data** Adopting a public health framework for addressing violence needs to be based on cross-agency, data-driven policies. Yet, most of government functions in agency siloes, where any given agency is disconnected from adjacent departments and their data systems. For example, addressing the criminal behavior of an individual experiencing homelessness cannot be solved without integrating data about that individual's situation across health, housing, education, and employment. Data integration is necessary for understanding the scope of and potential solutions for reducing racial inequalities in the criminal justice system.

**Reducing Gun Violence** Research shows that violence can be reduced through policies that limit access to firearms, increase restrictions for people with histories of violent crime, reduce access to firearms for young people,

impose waiting periods, and increase required firearm training. The report also highlights the use of racial equity impact assessment tools to identify and assess the factors influencing racial equity that can be considered with firearm policy development and implementation.

**Expanding Medicaid** Research shows that improving health care access by expanding Medicaid coverage is associated with reduced recidivism among people who have been convicted of violent and public order crimes. Moreover, there is evidence that Medicaid expansions are associated with reductions in robbery, aggravated assault, and larceny theft. Studies found that states that expanded Medicaid reduced violent crime over a ten-year period by 5.3 percent more than states that did not and saved approximately \$4 billion annually.

**Providing Primary Care** The Transitions Clinic Network is a nationwide network of primary care programs for individuals with chronic health conditions who were recently released from prison. Studies have shown that these programs increase patient engagement, reduce hospitalizations, and reduce future criminal justice contact. Each program assists individuals with successful and healthy re-integration into their lives and communities.

**Tackling Youth Mental Health** Youth struggling with mental health challenges need wrap-around and

diversion programs, as well as community-based mental health care specialized for youth. Research suggests that the presence of mental health care offices in a county can reduce crime rates. Youth and young adults suffering from both serious mental illness and substance use disorder require treatment that addresses the “whole person,” which may include psychosocial interventions, family behavioral therapy, medication, proactive outreach, and use of specialized applications that can assist or provide an intervention and track symptoms.

### **Reducing Harmful Environmental Exposures**

Environmental interventions designed to address harmful environmental exposures have been shown to reduce crime and criminal justice contact. According to research, lead remediation, nutritional assessment, medical evaluation, and ongoing developmental monitoring in youth can mitigate the harmful effects of lead exposure, which is associated with increased crime.

**Restricting the Sale of Alcohol** Policies that restrict the sale of alcohol in bars or restaurants during specific hours of the week are an intervention that researchers have found reduces violence. Based on this evidence, the use of regulations such as licensing and zoning to limit alcohol outlet density may help reduce associated acts of violence.

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### **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

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To read the full report, please visit <http://www.nationalacademies.org/reducing-racial-inequality>

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