

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report addresses the critical issues of racial disparities and inequities in jail settings. The study, supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation through the Safety and Justice Challenge Research Consortium, aims to develop and implement interventions to promote racial equity and improve jail conditions through a participatory and evidence-based quality improvement process.

BACKGROUND

Local jails in the United States admit over 10 million people annually, with substantial evidence indicating racial disparities in incarceration rates. Black individuals are disproportionately represented, with incarceration rates over three times higher than white individuals.

Racial disparities in jails significantly impact both staff and residents, fostering an environment of entrenched inequity and systemic bias. Black residents and staff encounter increased segregation, limited opportunities, and social stigma. For instance, Black residents often face restricted access to healthcare, mental health services, and beneficial programs compared to their white counterparts, which exacerbates their marginalization. Black staff members also report experiencing racial bias in promotions, disparities in salaries, and limited access to leadership opportunities, contributing to a hostile and inequitable work environment. Additionally, both Black staff and residents perceive a lack of accountability for racist behavior and misconduct, which perpetuates a culture of implicit racism and undermines trust and fairness within the jail system. This inequitable treatment underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these systemic issues and promote racial equity within the jail environment.

STUDY APPROACH

The study employed a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) methodology, integrating participatory methods to engage diverse stakeholders, including jail staff, residents, and community partners. This approach facilitated the identification of

historical and contemporary drivers of racism and the development of cohesive organizational goals to promote racial equity through the development of policy, procedural, and practice interventions.

KEY FINDINGS

Both residents and staff reported pervasive racism and racial inequities within the jail. Racial disparities extended to hiring, promotions, job assignments, healthcare, mental health services, and access to programs, with female residents particularly disadvantaged in terms of hygiene and program availability.

Recommendations included addressing racialized double standards in policy enforcement, promoting fairness in salary and incentives, and mitigating racial bias in promotions, orientation to residing in the jail, and programming assignment. Staff advocated for more Black individuals in leadership and training roles to enhance visibility.

Workgroups, comprising 30 staff and 28 residents, convened 11 times during the project. Their efforts yielded 74 recommended policy, practice, and procedural interventions designed to enhance living and working conditions within the jail and promote equity. We also conducted surveys involving 67 staff and 60 residents to assess the feasibility and acceptability of these recommendations, as well as to prioritize interventions. Guided by an antiracism framework, workgroups incorporated survey feedback, prioritized interventions, and convened four racial caucuses to review proposed recommendations.

A total of 30 policy, practice, and procedural interventions, categorized into Health and Wellbeing, Staff and Resident Interactions, and Training and Programs, were presented to jail administration. An implementation plan consistent with antiracism principles accompanied these recommendations. Our findings highlighted issues such as power imbalances, shared negative experiences in confinement, disparities in perceptions of racism between white and non-white staff and residents, and intersectional issues related to gender, ability, and country-of-origin.



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Reflections on the PDSA process led to insights on expediting and adapting it for increased impact. Strategies include overcoming barriers to participation, engaging jail administration in early, small wins for intervention implementation, adapting trust-building approaches, and integrating frequent racial caucuses. Moving forward, ongoing implementation, evaluation, and refinement of

interventions remain crucial. However, concerns persist among staff, residents, and administrators about the full adoption and sustainability of the effort and interventions. This underscores the broader implications for the sustainability of this transformative work and its potential for lasting systemic change.



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