Examining the Impact of the Federal Sentencing Guidelines on Racial Disparities in Federal Sentencing

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Racial disparities in federal sentencing have long raised concerns about fairness and the effectiveness of policies intended to mitigate them. This study examines whether judicial adherence to the Federal Sentencing Guidelines significantly reduces Black–White sentencing disparities. Using the United States Sentencing Commission's Interactive Data Analyzer, I analyzed 26,435 cases from fiscal years 2015–2024. Data were filtered to include only drug trafficking offenses involving Black or White defendants with Category 1 criminal histories. For each of the 94 federal district courts, I calculated the percentage of cases sentenced within the recommended guideline range and the percent difference in average sentence length between Black and White defendants. Linear regression was then used to measure the association between guideline application and racial disparity for each year. Across ten fiscal years, no statistically significant association was found, indicating that judicial application of the Guidelines explains none of the variation in racial disparity. Moreover, these are the first findings to prove that the Guidelines have been ineffective at reducing racial disparity in sentencing. Ultimately, I conclude that the Guidelines are structurally broken and beyond reform. Future research should therefore investigate other contributors to disparity and explore new models of federal sentencing.

Awards Won:
Second Award of $2,400