



U.S. Commission on Civil Rights
Rochelle Garza, Chair
1331 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Suite 1150
Washington, DC 20425

December 15, 2023

Dear Chair Garza and Members of the Commission,

The King County Sexual Assault Resource Center serves 5,000 individual sexual assault survivors and their family members each year, providing advocacy, therapy and prevention education to communities in the greater Seattle area. Our nonprofit organization, in operation since 1976, is the largest standalone sexual assault service provider in Washington state and in the Pacific Northwest.

We are grateful for the Commission's interest in and this opportunity to submit testimony on the critical topic of Racial Disparities in Violent Crime Victimization in the United States.

National statistics indicate most survivors do not or cannot report their sexual assault to the criminal justice system. This is due to a variety of reasons. But when a survivor reports, it is with the expectation that the criminal justice system will help protect them or others from further harm and provide meaningful interventions. Each victim's experience is individual, as are their definitions of accountability, but among the potential remedies held forth by our justice system are incarceration, protection or no-contact orders, treatment/rehabilitation, and/or restitution for costs victims incur resulting from the harm inflicted upon them.

These potential forms of accountability are a separate issue than the process they must undertake when reporting, however. Victims in Washington state and in many others have certain constitutional and statutory rights, including the right to be treated with respect and dignity, to receive timely information and notifications about their case, and a voice in the proceedings.

We have long raised concerns regarding the persistent failures of the criminal justice system to respond to victims of sexual assault in a trauma-informed way, which in effect infringes on these rights. This is a particular concern when it comes to survivors from marginalized communities, who often face multiple added barriers to justice when they come forward to report.

Though our mission focuses on the experiences of survivors, we are deeply troubled by the over-representation of people of color in our justice and carceral system. We strongly support alternatives to criminal justice for behavior that is currently criminalized but is rooted in economic desperation, over-policing of communities of color, and lack of resources.

How do we know this is an issue? Because a great deal of attention and study has focused on gathering and analyzing the data necessary to identify the problem, which has led to closer looks at policy choices surrounding defendants and respondents engaged in the criminal justice system.

We must be as dogged in the pursuit of data that informs us about the experience of sexual assault survivors who are engaged in that same system, and disparities in treatment they are experiencing due to their race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or identity, age or gender.

Absent that data, we cannot fully understand the intersecting barriers victims face in seeking help or in reducing perpetration. We look to data to inform policies, and without it, we cannot make sound policy choices and interventions.

This is all the more important because the little data that is available about victimization is shocking. A [Seattle Times front-page story from 2018 revealed a heartbreaking finding](#), surfaced years later by the Urban Indian Health Institute, that 94% of Native American women in Seattle surveyed reported they had been raped or coerced into sex at least once in their lives.

We see apparent disparities in victimization by race and ethnicity in our own client data. In recent years, we assisted victims who identify as Black, multi-racial or Latinx in far greater proportions than their overall population as a percentage in King County.

What we know is that the trauma of sexual assault can be devastating, often leaving a survivor with a lifetime of serious mental, physical and behavioral health impacts. Survivors are at significant risk of post-traumatic stress, serious depression and anxiety, and increased risk of suicide. Yet their welfare is frequently discounted or not considered at all when they seek help through the justice system.

We work with victims every day who undergo a lengthy and distressing process, endure a system that seems to be far more concerned about the defendant's future and well-being than the survivor's. After that experience, many ultimately question whether it was worth it to come forward, as they scramble to put in place safety plans and try to rebuild the rest of their lives.

We must be as concerned for the well-being and future potential of victims, and identify gaps in equitable experiences and outcomes as we are about those who cause them harm.

We encourage prioritizing:

- Resources for data collection and analysis to accurately capture the prevalence of and system response to victims of sexual assault within different demographic groups
- Increased transparency in reporting and prosecuting sexual assault cases; and
- Holding agencies accountable for addressing disparities in responding to victims

If we are to reduce and end the scourge of sexual violence in our communities, the criminal justice system must work to restore trust that it is there for victims, especially for victims who have historically been marginalized. We must recognize and address the systemic failures that perpetuate disparities in the criminal justice system's response to sexual assault survivors. By prioritizing data, we can work toward a more equitable and just society that prioritizes the rights and well-being of survivors by identifying and eliminating disparities in experience and outcomes.

Thank you again for the Commission's work and the opportunity to weigh in on this vital matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kate Krug" with a stylized flourish at the end.

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