



Co-chairs and Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Midge Purcell, Director of Advocacy and Public Policy for the Urban League of Portland, and I am urging you to support SB463, authorizing legislators to request Racial Impact Statements on matters pertaining to Criminal Justice and Human Services, in particular Child Welfare.

The Urban League supports this bill as one way of addressing the overrepresentation in the criminal justice system and in the child welfare system by racial and ethnic minorities. It is well documented that racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in our criminal justice system. However, most people do not realize the scale of disparity. African American men comprise almost 9.89% of the prison population and 1.7% of Oregon's state population. This means that black Oregonians are almost six times more likely to be in prison than white Oregonians.

There is similar overrepresentation in the child welfare system. Minority families are much more likely to be reported to child welfare authorities for suspected abuse or neglect, although child abuse rates are similar across racial groups. In Oregon, African American children account for 8.3% of the foster care population, but only 2.4% of Oregon's child population. Native American children comprise 8.8% of the foster care population but only 1.3% of Oregon child population. Children of color are more likely to be removed from their homes, and, once in foster care, they are much less likely to go back to their families.

These disparities are deeply concerning. Although DHS have made progress in dealing with overrepresentation in our child welfare system, and there is discussion currently on criminal justice reform, there is a need for tools at the legislative level to ensure that legislators can predict disparate racial impact in criminal justice and child welfare legislation before a bill is passed, and have the information they need to avoid unintended consequences.

Racial Impact Statements (RIS) are a first step to balancing the inequities in our criminal justice system and child welfare system. The over-representation of certain communities of color in the criminal justice system means we may be using criminal justice interventions in ways that are not necessary. This not only creates a resource drain for the system that impacts all Oregonians who depend on the effectiveness of our public safety system, but it creates a distressing set of consequences for specific groups of people. For example, criminal convictions and incarceration makes it more difficult for people to find housing and jobs when they return to the community. Unnecessary criminal justice interventions can lead to creating a group of Oregonians who increasingly live on the margins. That dynamic hurts us all by increasing recidivism, future crime, and demands for a variety of public resources. Research shows that harsher sentencing and over-criminalization does not lead to better outcomes.

The ability to keep families together and within their communities also reduces contact with the juvenile justice system and improved educational outcomes for children and families who can avoid contact with the child welfare system.

We urge you to support the use of Racial Impact Statements as another tool to begin to reduce these disparities in our criminal justice and child welfare systems. We urge you to support SB 463.