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HB277/SB941: Sentencing Disparities in Tennessee

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Belmont University BSW Program

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Abstract

There is a long history of sentencing disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system. Criminal justice advocates suggest these disparities occur when people receive different punishments for the same crime, or the same punishment for different crimes. Data indicates contributing factors to these disparities can include the race of the individual, their socioeconomic status, and the quality of defense. According to the Sentencing Project (2023) and the Vera Institute for Justice (2023), black individuals are twice as likely to be arrested and 5.1 times more likely to be sentenced to prison than white individuals. Economically, studies show that people represented by public counsel receive sentences that are *years* longer than those represented by private counsel, and near 80% of all defendants in the United States are unable to afford a privately funded defense. Despite these findings, research on sentencing disparities in Tennessee are sparse and unspecific, contributing to a lack of understanding regarding how these disparities play out in our communities. This gap in our knowledge acts as a hindrance for change. House Bill 277 and corresponding Senate Bill 941 attempt to bridge the gap between awareness and solution-focused thinking by proposing state-wide research on sentencing disparities in Tennessee, and their underlying causes. If passed, this legislation would foster a greater understanding of where the Tennessee criminal justice system stands in the context of this complex national crisis, upholding core social work values in the process, and honoring our professional commitment to evidenced based advocacy practice.