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Article published Aug 19, 2009

## Fairly serving youths of color

There is no shortage of studies pointing to racial disparities within the juvenile justice system, of data that indicate that youths of color make up a higher percentage of those under supervision than their percentage in the general population.

Workable ways to reduce those disparities, however, are a bit harder to come by.

But the Indiana State Bar Association is committed to finding solutions. As part of that commitment, the group will present "Summit on Racial Disparities in the Juvenile Justice System: A Statewide Dialogue." Scheduled for Aug. 27 in Indianapolis, the summit will bring together law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, probation officers and detention center directors and will feature a lineup of national speakers.

The event follows last fall's release of a report by the Commission on Disproportionality in Youth Services, which was established by the Indiana General Assembly in 2007. The report, written after a series of public forums and stakeholder meetings across the state, offers a troubling look at how youth of color are over- and underrepresented in Indiana's child welfare, education, juvenile justice and mental health systems.

For example, African-American youth are 2.64 times more likely to be arrested than other youth and .52 times less likely to be diverted to alternative programs than other youth. And youth with undiagnosed or misdiagnosed mental health challenges are more likely to experience school expulsions, juvenile detention or placement in other settings that may be unresponsive to their needs. African Americans tend to be over-represented in these situations, yet are underrepresented among those obtaining mental health services. Recommendations to improve such conditions are included in the report (available at [www.inbar.org/linkclick.aspx?fileticket=VWTg6i25jTY%3d&tabid=36](http://www.inbar.org/linkclick.aspx?fileticket=VWTg6i25jTY%3d&tabid=36)), reflecting research of state and national programs that have been effective in addressing the disparities.

A common component of successful approaches involves changing how the systems interact with youths, delivering services that are free of racial and cultural bias.

The report's authors conclude that providing greater equity in Indiana's social systems will require a consistent, well-coordinated effort. The Indiana State Bar Association's statewide summit seems an important step in that direction. We hope our local officials -- including St. Joseph County Prosecutor Michael Dvorak, South Bend Police Chief Darryl Boykins, St. Joseph County Sheriff Frank Canarecci and Juvenile Judge Peter J. Nemeth -- plan to participate.

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