



CIVIL RIGHTS CLINIC
THE UNIVERSITY of TEXAS SCHOOL of LAW

For immediate release: February 4, 2020

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Key findings from upcoming report reveal Travis County drug possession arrests disproportionately harm Black residents

County and City should use harm reduction and public health strategies, not arrests and incarceration

Austin, TX — A review of 2,900 drug possession arrests in Travis County from June 2017 to May 2018 reveals troubling police practices that harm communities, exacerbate racial disparities in arrests and jail detention, and fail to address underlying needs of people who use drugs.

According to [key findings](#) from the report, which is scheduled for release February 18, Black residents in Travis County represented 29.4 percent of drug possession arrests, despite comprising only 8.9 percent of the population. Researchers found that half of the arrests analyzed arose from motor vehicle stops, typically for minor traffic violations such as failure to signal or expired registration. The review also showed that drug possession arrests are concentrated in specific areas of Austin where Black and Latinx communities predominantly reside. These findings confirm a recent City of Austin report finding that Black and Latinx residents are overrepresented in Austin Police Department motor vehicle stops.

The report authors emphasize the need to build upon current efforts, such as the Sobering Center and elimination of arrests for low-level cannabis possession, to create a different approach to addressing drug use within the county. Instead of arrest and incarceration, which are costly and disruptive to families and communities, local policy-makers should invest in resources that provide avenues for treatment for those who seek it, and prevent harms like overdose.

Doug Smith, Senior Policy Analyst at the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, said, “Typical War on Drugs enforcement, especially for low-level possession, is a net negative for the community. Even short periods in jail result in the loss of jobs or housing, family separation, child welfare system involvement, and a host of long-term consequences that limit future opportunities.”

Cate Graziani, Policy and Operations Director at the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, said, “A harm reduction approach would limit the role of the criminal justice system in addressing substance use, and instead, link people to the appropriate support they need. Ultimately, this is the only approach that has been proven to be effective in addressing problematic drug use. Countries around the world that have abandoned the War on Drugs and focused on building a public health approach to substance use have seen no increase in crime rates, and have lower rates of communicable disease and overdose.”

David Johnson, Criminal Justice Organizer at Grassroots Leadership, said, “People should not be punished for needing help, yet the reality is that people have been locked away for mental illness and substance use for generations. I know firsthand the countless ways in which lives are torn apart by the misdiagnosis and mistreatment of public health issues as criminal justice ones. Punitive policing and mass incarceration



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help no one. It's time for Travis County to do better and invest in services that help those who need it the most."

The full report will be released on February 18 and will detail the community harm that comes from arrest-based drug enforcement, while offering alternative approaches to address health and safety. The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, Grassroots Leadership, and the Civil Rights Clinic of the University of Texas School of Law conducted this research in response to rising rates of low-level drug possession arrests in Travis County. Read key findings from the upcoming report [here](#).

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Grassroots Leadership is an Austin, Texas-based national organization that works for a more just society where prison profiteering, mass incarceration, deportation, and criminalization are things of the past. Follow us [@Grassroots_News](#).

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition (TCJC) advances solutions and builds coalitions to end mass incarceration and foster safer Texas communities. To learn more about TCJC, visit www.TexasCJC.org.

The [Texas Harm Reduction Alliance](#) aims to build a harm reduction movement in Texas to advance policies, practices, and programs that reduce the harmful consequences of substance use and misuse in Texas, create positive change, and save lives.

The [Civil Rights Clinic](#) at the University of Texas School of Law represents low-income clients in a range of civil rights matters, engaging law students.