Blacks more likely to be imprisoned for drug crimes

African-Americans nearly 5 times more likely than whites to get prison sentence for low-level violations, Illinois study says

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Blacks in Illinois were nearly five times more likely to be sentenced to prison for low-level drug crimes than whites, according to a state study released Monday.

The disparity is even bigger in Cook County, where blacks charged with low-level drug possession were eight times more likely than whites to be sentenced to prison, according to the report from the Disproportionate Justice Impact Study Commission.

The findings, which are based on 2005 data, are in line with the results of similar local and national studies conducted in the last few years that revealed wide disparities between whites and minorities in drug-related arrests, convictions and sentences.

The divide stems in part from intense police activity in high-crime urban areas, where sales take place in open-air drug markets, making it easier to arrest dealers and buyers, said David Olson, chairman of Loyola University Chicago's criminal justice department.

Police are less likely to take notice of drug activity in suburbs, where crime rates are lower and drugs usually aren't sold on the streets, Olson said.

"Minorities aren't necessarily more likely to use drugs than whites, but from the data that's available and from the study, it's evident that they're much more likely to be apprehended," Olson said. "I don't think it's necessarily a policy of the police department to do that. I think it's just an outcome of where they put their resources."

The difference in police deployments means minorities involved in the urban drug trade are more likely to have more extensive arrest records than suburban dealers and users, which can lead to longer sentences, Olson said.

A Tribune investigation in 2007 also detailed how some drug laws — such as those targeting dealers arrested near churches, schools, parks and public housing — disproportionately affect predominantly black neighborhoods.

Monday's study made several recommendations, from urging lawmakers to analyze the potential effects of new criminal justice legislation on minorities to expanding sentencing alternatives such as drug treatment. The nonpartisan commission was formed by law in 2008 to study the effect of the state's drug laws on racial and ethnic minorities.