



**LEGAL  
DATA  
AND  
DESIGN  
CLINIC**

# SYSTEMIC RACISM IN CHARLES COUNTY

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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether and where systemic racism exists in the Charles County criminal justice system.

Our data sample was derived from Case Harvester, a database designed by the Open Justice containing court cases “scraped” from Maryland Judicial Case Search. We accessed Case Harvester using SQL queries. These queries resulted in an initial sample of over 300,000 cases. Our analysis focused on criminal cases filed between 2016 and 2020 in the District Court of Maryland for Charles County and the Circuit Court of Maryland for Charles County. The initial data sample was then filtered and analyzed using Jupyter Notebook, pandas, Microsoft Excel, and other data analysis tools.

In addition, we studied Charles County’s demographical information, including race, income, and poverty levels to better understand the relationship between cases, case dispositions, charges, and race.

The following sections further explain the contextual information utilized in the study, the data analysis, and our conclusions as whether the court system and policing in Charles County contribute to systemic racism within the criminal justice system.

## Overview: The Court System

Charles County’s criminal court system is composed of the District Court of Maryland for Charles County and the Circuit Court of Maryland.

**District Courts** are where the vast majority of criminal cases begin. These courts typically adjudicate misdemeanors but can decide certain felonies. District courts share jurisdiction with circuit courts over criminal cases where the penalty may be confinement for 3 years or more, a fine of at least \$2,500, or certain felonies. No jury trials out conducted by district courts.

In contrast, **Circuit Courts** may hold jury or bench (where cases are decided solely by a judge) trials. These courts generally handle more serious criminal cases. The Circuit Court hears most cases appealed from district courts, orphans’ courts, and some administrative agencies.

## Charles County Demographics

Charles County's demographics provide baseline, or "starting" data, to contextualize the results of our study. In 2018, Charles County had approximately 157,732 residents.<sup>1</sup> The median household income was \$95,924 and almost 6.1% of the population was indigent. The racial breakdown demonstrates that the majority of Charles County residents identify as either Black or white and 5.6% of the population identifies as Hispanic or Latino.

Race	Population±	Percentage of Charles County
Asian	4,900	3.1%
Black	70,085	44.4%
Native American	843	0.54%
Other	1,150	0.72%
Pacific Islander	64	0.04%
White	71,710	45.8%
Two or More Races	8,980	5.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>157,732±</b>	<b>100.3%±</b>

*DATAUSA: Charles County, MD*

## CHARGING DISTRIBUTION

The following section provides a breakdown of the number of charges by court, year, and race. **Cases** are the composition of all charges related to the same incident in the complaint filed against a defendant. **Charges** are each individual allegation associated with a defendant for a specific case. Our analysis identified charges and cases using the defendant's ID number. Each instance an ID number appeared in our results counted as a single charge. For cases, each ID number was considered a case.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/charles-county-md#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20Charles%20County%2C%20MD,%2495%2C924%2C%20a%202.08%25%20increase.>

## Total Cases by Court and Year

Between 2016 and 2020, Charles County courts decided **23,141** cases. Of these cases, **18,519** were adjudicated in the District Court and the remaining **4,622** were decided in the Circuit Court.

Cases by Court and Year			
Year (by Filing Date)	District Court	Circuit Court	Total
2016	3,931	1,103	5,034
2017	3,860	1,009	4,869
2018	3,779	916	4,695
2019	3,992	1,026	5,018
2020	2,957	568	3,525
<b>Total</b>	<b>18,519</b>	<b>4,622</b>	<b>23,141</b>

## Cases by Race

The majority of court cases brought in Charles County courts involved Black defendants. **65.1%** of cases brought in either Charles County court were brought against Black defendants. These defendants comprised **63.7%** percent of cases in the District Court and **70.7%** of cases in the Circuit Court, compared to **33.6%** and **28.6%** of white defendants.

Number of Cases by Court, Race, and Year				
District Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	2,336	1,511	84	3,931
2017	2,417	1,348	95	3,860
2018	2,353	1,284	142	3,779
2019	2,706	1,194	92	3,992
2020	1,993	892	72	2,957
<b>District Court Total</b>	<b>11,805</b>	<b>6,229</b>	<b>485</b>	<b>18,519</b>

Number of Cases by Court, Race, and Year				
Circuit Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	758	343	2	1,103
2017	731	275	3	1,009
2018	643	262	11	916
2019	733	283	10	1,026
2020	402	157	9	568
<b>Circuit Court Total</b>	<b>3,267</b>	<b>1,320</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>4,622</b>

<b>Total for Both Courts</b>	<b>15,072</b>	<b>7,549</b>	<b>490</b>	<b>23,141</b>
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Number of Cases by Court, Race, and Year (Percentage per Year)				
District Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	59.4%	38.4%	2.1%	100.0%
2017	62.6%	34.9%	2.5%	100.0%
2018	62.3%	34.0%	3.8%	100.0%
2019	67.8%	29.9%	2.3%	100.0%
2020	67.4%	30.2%	2.4%	100.0%
District Court Total	63.7%	33.6%	2.6%	100.0%

Circuit Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	68.7%	31.1%	0.2%	100.0%
2017	72.4%	27.3%	0.3%	100.0%
2018	70.2%	28.6%	1.2%	100.0%
2019	15.9%	6.1%	0.2%	22.2%
2020	70.8%	27.6%	1.6%	100.0%
Circuit Court Total	70.7%	28.6%	0.8%	100.0%

Total for Both Courts	65.1%	32.6%	3.4%	100.0%
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## Total Charges by Court and Year

The total number of charges by court and year are described in the table below. Between 2016 and 2020, Charles County courts decided cases involving **63,709** charges. Of these charges, **41,387** were adjudicated in the District Court and the remaining **22,322** were decided in the Circuit Court.

Charges by Court and Year			
Year (by Filing Date)	District Court	Circuit Court	Total
2016	8,774	5,168	13,942
2017	8,929	4,798	13,727
2018	8,631	4,233	12,864
2019	8,612	4,928	13,540
2020	6,441	3,195	9,636
Total	41,387	22,322	63,709

## Charges by Race

Throughout the specified four-year period, Black defendants accounted for the majority of charges in either court.

Number of Charges by Court, Race, and Year				
District Court for Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	5,613	3,036	125	8,774
2017	5,765	2,991	173	8,929
2018	5,566	2,846	219	8,631
2019	5,983	2,494	135	8,612
2020	4,451	1,887	103	6,441
<b>District Court Total</b>	<b>27,378</b>	<b>13,254</b>	<b>755</b>	<b>41,387</b>

Circuit Court for Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	3,604	1,557	7	5,168
2017	3,550	1,238	10	4,798
2018	3,048	1,149	36	4,233
2019	3,438	1,457	33	4,928
2020	2,381	722	92	3,195
<b>Circuit Court Total</b>	<b>16,021</b>	<b>6,123</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>22,322</b>

<b>Total for Both Courts</b>	<b>43,399</b>	<b>19,377</b>	<b>933</b>	<b>63,709</b>
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Number of Charges by Court, Race, and Year (Percentages per Year)				
District Court for Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	64.0%	34.6%	1.4%	100.0%
2017	64.6%	33.5%	1.9%	100.0%
2018	64.5%	33.0%	2.5%	100.0%
2019	69.5%	29.0%	1.6%	100.0%
2020	69.1%	29.3%	1.6%	100.0%
<b>District Court Total</b>	<b>66.2%</b>	<b>32.0%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Circuit Court for Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Other	Total
2016	69.7%	30.1%	0.1%	100.0%
2017	74.0%	25.8%	0.2%	100.0%
2018	72.0%	27.1%	0.9%	100.0%
2019	69.8%	29.6%	0.7%	100.0%
2020	74.5%	22.6%	2.9%	100.0%
<b>Circuit Court Total</b>	<b>71.8%</b>	<b>27.4%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

<b>Total for Both Courts</b>	<b>68.1%</b>	<b>30.4%</b>	<b>1.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
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Almost **72%** of those charged in the Circuit Court and **66%** of those charged in the District Court were Black. These values are especially alarming with compared to Charles County's racial demographics. Despite accounting for approximately **44%** of Charles County's population, almost **70%** of defendants were Black. A stark contrast from their white counterparts who account for received **30%** of charges, but also account for almost **44%** of the population. This trend disputes the idea of a fair and equal justice system that does not judge on the basis of race.

## Median Number of Charges

The median, or midpoint, of the number of charges for each case by court, race, and year indicate that half of the sample received one charge in the district court while the other half received more than one charge. In the Circuit Court, half of all defendants received less than three charges while the other half received more than three charges.

Median Number of Charges by Court, Race, and Year			
District Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Total
2016	1	1	1
2017	1	1	1
2018	1	1	1
2019	1	1	1
2020	1	1	1
District Court Total	1	1	1

Circuit Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Total
2016	3	3	3
2017	3	3	3
2018	3	3	3
2019	3	3	3
2020	3	3	3
Circuit Court Total	3	3	3

## Mean Number of Charges

The mean number of charges for each year by court, race, and year shown below demonstrate that that Black defendants, on average, receive a higher number of charges than white defendants in the District and Circuit Courts. Defendants of both races whose cases were heard in the Circuit Court received a higher average number of charges.



Mean Number of Charges by Court, Race, and Year			
District Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Total
2016	2.4	2	2.23
2017	2.38	2.22	2.31
2018	2.36	2.22	2.28
2019	2.21	2.09	2.16
2020	2.23	2.12	2.18
District Court Total	2.32	2.13	2.23

Circuit Court For Charles County - Criminal	Black	White	Total
2016	4.75	4.53	4.68
2017	4.84	4.49	4.74
2018	4.73	4.39	4.62
2019	4.69	5.15	4.8
2020	5.92	4.6	5.63
Circuit Court Total	4.99	4.63	4.89

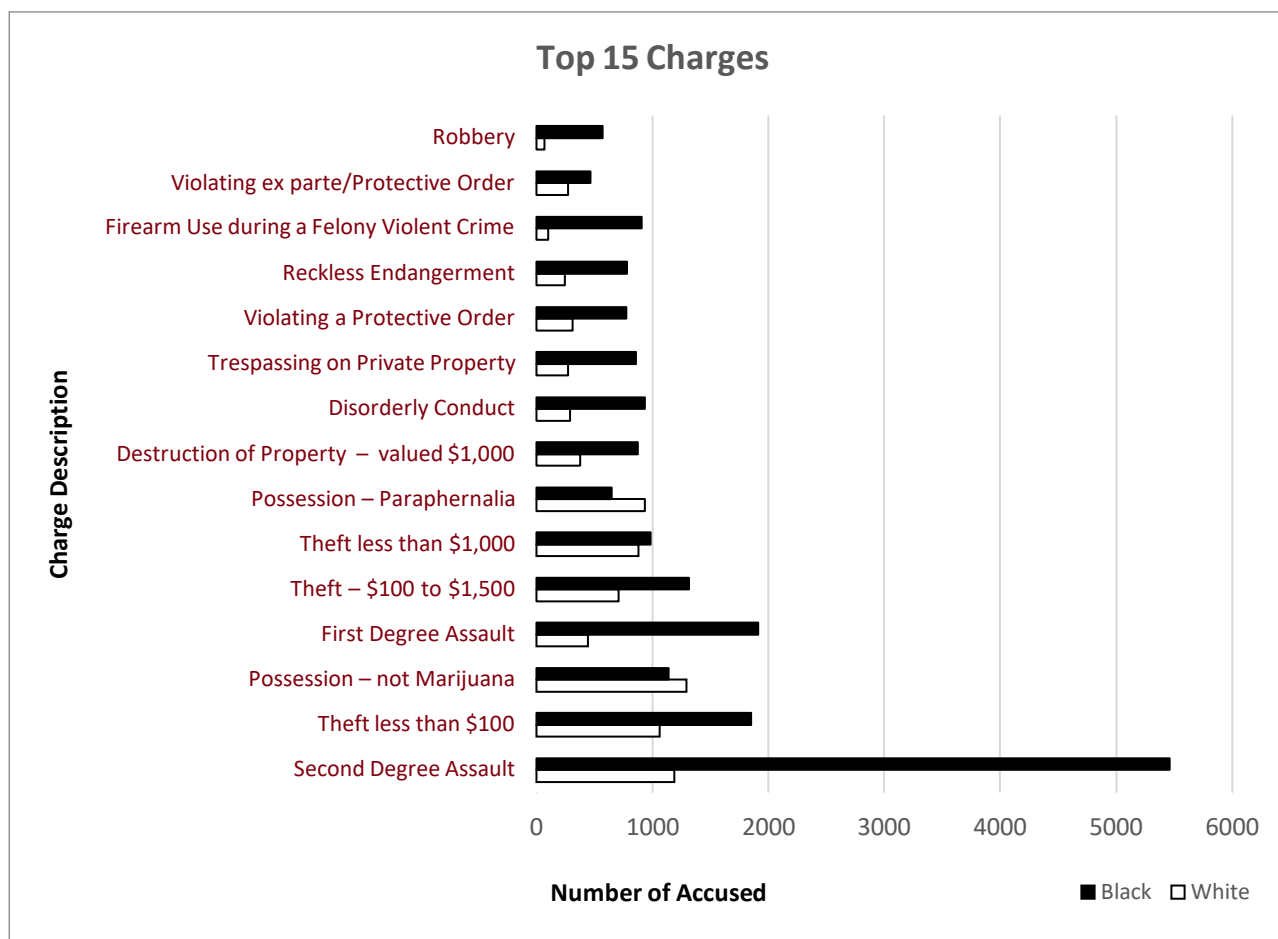
## SPECIFIC CHARGES FOR BLACK AND WHITE DEFENDENTS

We conducted an in-depth evaluation concerning the effects of race on the charges a defendant received. The first step in this process was determining the offenses with which defendants were most commonly charged. The “**Top 15 Charges**” in Charles County were derived by filtering the sample for the most commonly occurring charges. The resulting charges from the most to least common charge are depicted in the figure below:

## Top 15 Charges in Charles County



After determining the Top 15 Charges, we filtered the data by race. This analysis revealed that Black defendants are two times more likely to be charged with disorderly conduct than white defendants.



Racial disparity is extremely prevalent. A closer look into three specific charges indicate that this disparity may be even worse than it appears.

## AN IN-DEPTH LOOK: DISORDERLY CONDUCT, FAILURE TO OBEY, AND RESISTING ARREST

The stark disparity in disorderly conduct charges between Black and white Charles County residents supports the inference that police disproportionately judge Black residents' conduct as "disorderly". The inherently vague and imprecise definition of "disorderly" makes differential treatment based on race possible. It leaves enormous room for discretion and abuse of discretion. This danger also exists in charges like disorderly conduct -- failure to obey and resisting arrest. Behavior that is considered merely "obnoxious" when conducted by white residents could

be considered “disorderly conduct” when attributed to a Black resident. Similarly, a white resident’s “dissatisfaction” with being arrested is likely construed as resisting arrest or failing to obey when associated with a Black resident.

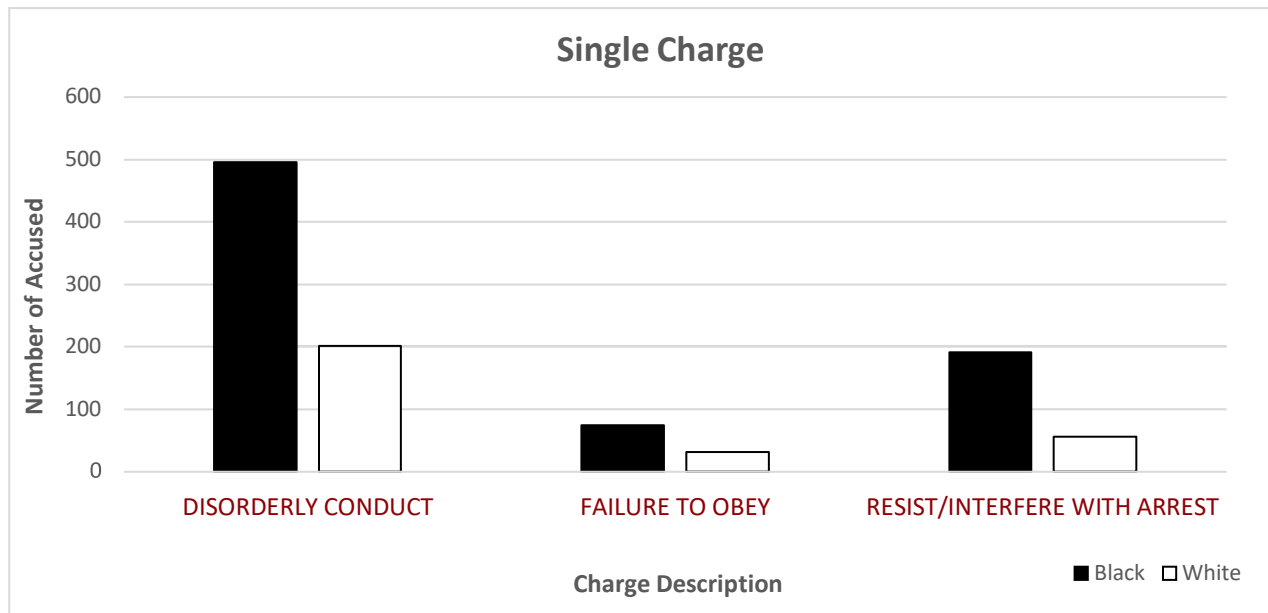
The values below depict the number of Black and white residents who received the specified charges. The **Single Charges** section presents the number of defendants who received one of the specified charges, while the **Two Charges** section displays the number of defendants who received any combination of two of the three specified charges. Similarly, the **Three Charges** section illustrates the number of Black and white defendants who received three charges (in any combination) as well as the “Trifecta.”

## Single Charge

Between 2016 and 2020, 2,462 Charles County residents were charged with disorderly conduct, failure to obey, or resisting or interfering with arrest. 761 (**73%**) of the accused were Black. The majority of residents charged with committing one of these offenses were accused of disorderly conduct. However, **two** times as many Black residents as white residents were charged with disorderly conduct. **Two** times as Black residents were accused of failing to obey an officer, while almost **three** times as many Black residents were charged with resisting or interfering with arrest.

Charge Description	Race		Total
	Black	White	
DISORDERLY CONDUCT	496	201	697
FAILURE TO OBEY	74	31	105
RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST*	191	56	247
<b>Total</b>	<b>761</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>1,049</b>

*\*This data table combines the charges “Resist/Interfere with Arrest” and “Resisting Arrest.”*

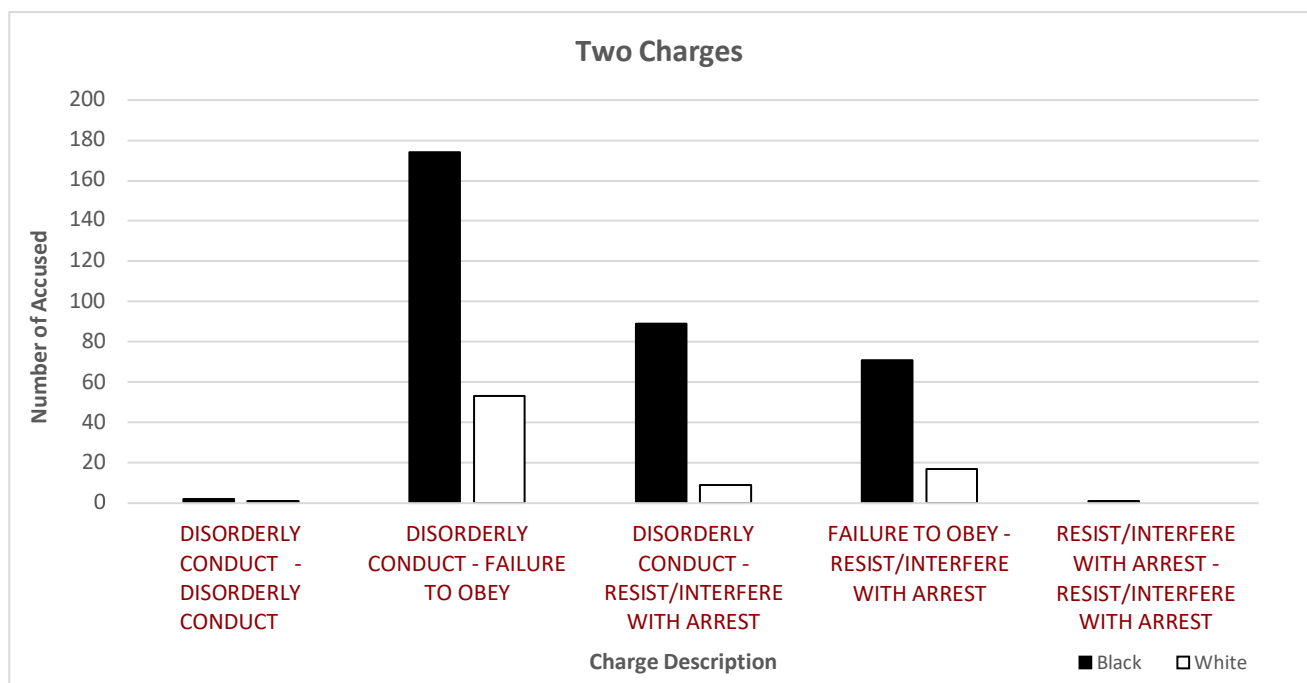


## Two Charges

417 Charles County defendants were charged with two of the specified charges. Black defendants comprise **80.8%** of the charges while white defendants account for the remaining **19.2%**, a stark contrast considering the number of Black and white residents in Charles County are almost equal.

Charge Description	Race		Total
	Black	White	
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - DISORDERLY CONDUCT	2	1	3
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - FAILURE TO OBEY	174	53	227
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	89	9	98
FAILURE TO OBEY - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	71	17	88
RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	1	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>337</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>417</b>

*\*This data table combines the charges "Resist/Interfere with Arrest" and "Resisting Arrest."*

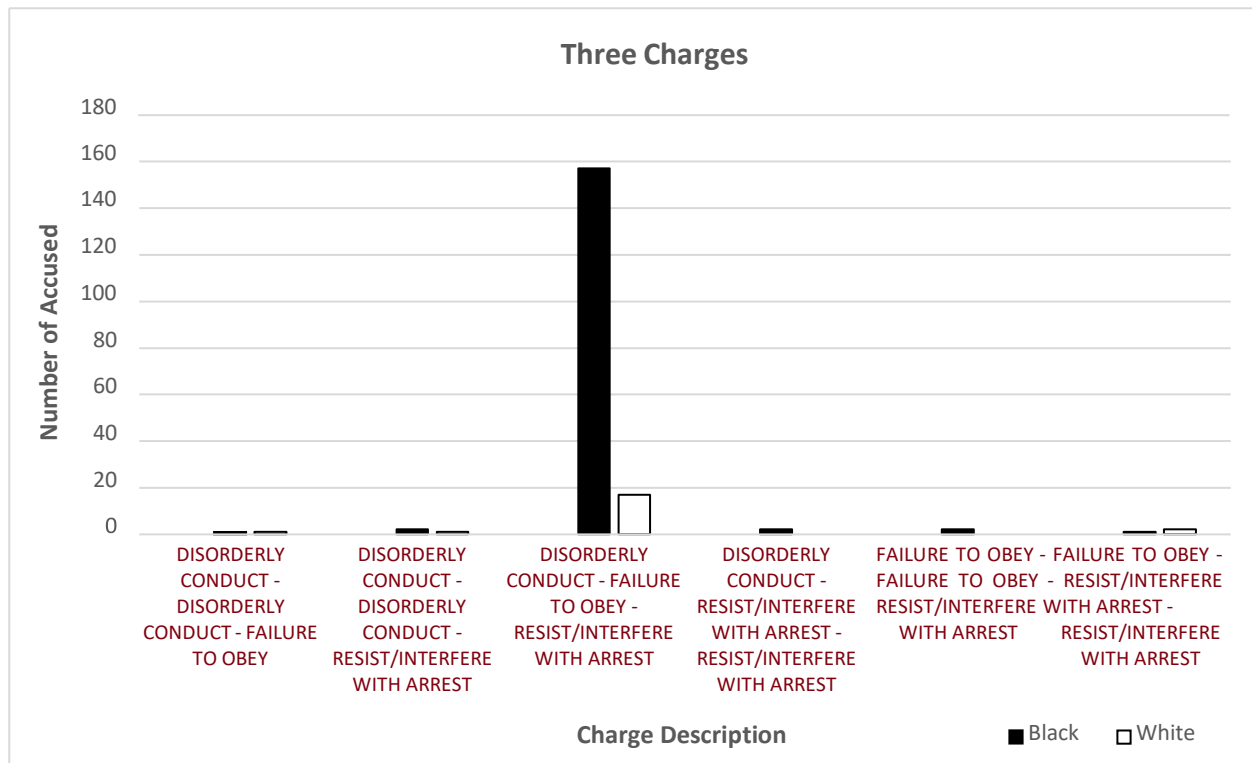


### Three Charges

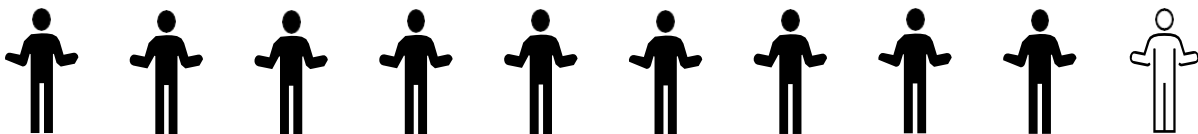
The chart and graph below depict the number of accused of each race to receive any combination of the three charges. The chart below also depicts the “trifecta,” which consists of being charged with failure to obey, disorderly conduct, and resisting or interfering with arrest. The trifecta was analyzed to determine how many of the accused were charged with all three charges in the same instance.

Charge Description	Race		Total
	Black	White	
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - DISORDERLY CONDUCT – FAILURE TO OBEY	1	1	2
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - DISORDERLY CONDUCT - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	2	1	3
<b>DISORDERLY CONDUCT - FAILURE TO OBEY - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>174</b>
DISORDERLY CONDUCT - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	2	0	2
FAILURE TO OBEY - FAILURE TO OBEY - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	2	0	2
FAILURE TO OBEY - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST - RESIST/INTERFERE WITH ARREST	1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>186</b>

*\*This data table combines the charges “Resist/Interfere with Arrest” and “Resisting Arrest.”*



**90%** of Charles County residents charged with disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, and failure to obey identified as Black. White residents accounted for the remaining **10%**. In other words, only **1** white person was charged with this Trifecta for every **9** Black people charged.



## CONCLUSION

**The Charles County criminal justice system suffers from structural racism.**

The data supports the conclusion that deep racial disparity exists within Charles County. Charles County police officers are likely to provide white people with more leniency than Black people. This study revealed that despite the near equal populations and similar number of general charges, there is a substantial difference in how Black and white defendants are charged. The above analysis shows that Black people are more likely to be charged with the majority of the Top 15 commonly occurring charges. Further, a comparison of the charging of Disorderly Conduct, Resisting Arrest, and Failure to Obey revealed that Black citizens account for 70% of nearly all charges, a clear indication that Charles County police officers likely provide white individuals more leniency than Black residents.

A review of the historical United States Census racial demographics revealed that Charles County was composed of 69% white and 26% Black residents in 2000. In 2010, white residents accounted for almost 50% of the population compared to 41% of Black residents. In 2018, the populations for each racial group were nearly equal. As racial demographics in Charles County have changed and white individuals have lost their clear majority status, it is perhaps unsurprising that the effects of systemic racism have been exacerbated. However, this is not an acceptable situation. A truly just criminal legal system would not suffer from such marked inequality.