

STATEMENT OF THE NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC DEFENDER ASSOCIATION
AND THE NORTH CAROLINA PUBLIC DEFENDER COMMITTEE ON RACIAL
EQUITY

The recent deaths of several African American men following interactions with police, and the challenge of holding the officers who killed them responsible, have compelled us to express our concerns regarding the criminal justice system nationally and within the state of North Carolina. While we are encouraged by the outcry and conversation that has resulted from these tragedies and the efforts being made by many to advocate for necessary reforms, the reality is that people of color continue to be disproportionately impacted by our criminal justice system. In fact, the most compelling and disturbing feature of this country's criminal and juvenile justice system is its disparate impact on people of color. While multiple factors contribute to this disparity, a significant factor is implicit and explicit racial bias.

As public defenders in North Carolina, we are on the frontlines of our criminal justice system, representing indigent defendants in criminal court every day. While disparate policing practices certainly impact the arrests of our clients, we cannot ignore the effects of race at every stage of the criminal justice process, to include charging determinations, grand jury procedures, bond determinations, plea negotiations, jury selection, and finally in the sentencing of our clients.

Men, women, and children of color are treated differently, and often more harshly, by the criminal justice system in North Carolina and across the country. Statistics regarding the racially disparate outcomes emanating from our criminal justice system are compelling and have contributed to the current lack of public confidence in our system.

As public defenders, we have great respect for law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and all the court officials we interact with on a daily basis. However, our regard for these professionals does not deter us from seeking to hold all criminal justice system stakeholders to the highest of standards. We expect nothing less of ourselves. Equity and fairness must be the hallmark of our criminal and juvenile justice system. The time is now for us to come together and turn our concerns into meaningful and lasting reform.

Our statement today represents our desire and commitment to join with other stakeholders to recognize, discuss, and address the racial disparities and racial biases that plague our criminal justice system. We stand committed as public defenders to working in furtherance of a fair and equitable criminal justice system in North Carolina and beyond.