



SANTA CRUZ COUNTY OFFICE OF THE
PUBLIC DEFENDER
COURAGE. COMPASSION. COMMUNITY.

Juneteenth is an Opportunity to Reflect on Next Steps in Our Ongoing Journey Toward Racial Justice

As Public Defenders, we are on the frontlines of the **continuing struggle to achieve true equity** in our community and nation. Observing Juneteenth gives us an opportunity to reflect on the history of emancipation and our ongoing journey toward racial justice here in Santa Cruz County and beyond. Today, **we celebrate our progress** while recognizing that we **still have a long way to go** to achieve true equity.

What is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth, also known as Emancipation Day or Freedom Day, commemorates June 19, 1865. On this day, Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, arrived in Galveston, Texas, to announce the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of enslaved individuals. This announcement marked a significant milestone in American history, as it officially ended slavery nationally. However, General Granger's announcement happened a full two years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, due to confederate resistance to abolition. Today, Juneteenth stands as a powerful **symbol of resilience** and an important reminder of the work we still must do in our **ongoing struggle for justice**.

Ways to Celebrate Juneteenth

Celebrating Juneteenth can be both a personal and community-oriented endeavor. Here are several ways we can honor this day, as individuals and as a community.

- **Educate and Reflect:** Spend some time reading about the history of Juneteenth and its significance. Books like [*"On Juneteenth"*](#) by Annette Gordon-Reed offer historical insights that shed light on the lasting impacts of slavery in America.
- **Support Black-Owned Businesses:** Use this opportunity to support local Black entrepreneurs and businesses. [Black Owned Santa Cruz](#) provides a directory of Black owned business in Santa Cruz County.
- **Participate in Community Events:** Visit [Santa Cruz Juneteenth](#) for a list of celebrations in Santa Cruz County.
- **Volunteer or Donate:** Support organizations working toward racial equity, such as [Black Surf Santa Cruz](#), a local nonprofit that is dedicated to creating intentional, inclusive, and

supportive environments for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within ocean and outdoor recreation spaces.

- **Reflect on Personal Commitments:** Use this day to consider your own role in promoting justice and equality.

Disparities in Law Enforcement & Justice

Juneteenth gives us a chance to reflect on racial disparities within law enforcement and the criminal legal system in Santa Cruz County. As a County, we are committed to advancing equity, including in the criminal legal system, with a [County Equity Statement](#) that declares: “Equity in action in Santa Cruz County is a transformative process that embraces individuals of every status, providing unwavering support, dignity, and compassion. Through this commitment, the County ensures intentional opportunities and access, fostering an environment where everyone can thrive and belong.” These efforts are ongoing and require diligence, transparency, and constant reexamination of our policies, procedures, and practices in view of our goal to transform our community so that everyone can thrive and belong.

We understand that we still have work to do.

Black individuals make up about 1.5% of Santa Cruz County’s population (2,850 people, per [2020 Census](#)). Yet, here, as elsewhere in the nation, black individuals experience disproportionately higher rates of stops and arrests and are over-represented in the criminal legal system. While we are making progress to gather and analyze data to implement policies that advance equity, Santa Cruz County mirrors the state and nation in our disproportionate policing and incarceration of Black individuals.

Santa Cruz County Sheriff Chris Clark has joined other County leaders in working to advance equity, including participating in [Annie E. Casey’s Results Count](#) leadership training. The Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s Office has shared data to deepen our understanding of ways we can improve. Through these efforts, we have learned:

Police Stops

In 2023, Santa Cruz County Sheriff’s deputies conducted approximately 10,489 stops, and Black individuals were 2.7 times more likely to be stopped than white individuals, per 10,000 residents. This mirrors broader California trends, where across the state, Black individuals were stopped at 2.3 times the rate of white people in 2023.

Source: sfchronicle.com, santacruzcountycalifornia.gov

Arrests for Non-Violent Offenses

Between 2013 and 2023, out of 23,970 total arrests, 13,621 (57%) arrests were for “low-level,” non-violent offenses. During this period, Black individuals were 3.7 times more likely to be arrested for low-level, non-violent offenses than white people.

Sources: datasharescc.org; policescorecard.org; policescorecard.org

Use of Force

In 2023, law enforcement used force in approximately 0.2% of all stops in Santa Cruz County, with statewide data indicating that Black individuals experienced use of force at higher rates compared to whites.

Source: shf.santacruzcountyca.gov; sfchronicle.com; santacruzlocal.org; policescorecard.org

Incarceration & Jail Data

Santa Cruz County’s average daily jail population hovers around 640 people (4 per 1,000 residents), with 65% of incarcerated persons there pretrial, *before a conviction*. Nationally, Black Americans are incarcerated at over 5 times the rate of white Americans. Data from the Early Representation Project at the Santa Cruz County Office of the Public Defender, which links incarcerated individuals to public defenders before their first court date, shows that pretrial incarceration in Santa Cruz County tracks these trends.

Source: policescorecard.org; naacpsantacruz.com

Probation and Supervision

A 2021 County report highlighted that Black probationers are often assigned higher risk scores, partly due to more frequent police contact, which can exacerbate disparities by increasing the likelihood of probation violations. Santa Cruz County Probation, whose leaders also participated in Annie E. Casey’s Results Count program, continue to retool processes and procedures to address these inequities.

Sources: bscc.ca.gov; santacruzcountyca.gov; racecounts.org

These disparities in our criminal legal system contribute to a cumulative burden on Black communities. Even though Black residents represent a small share of the population, they face substantially higher policing and criminal legal system contact. This underscores the need for continued targeted reforms in policing practices, diversion programs, community supervision, and systemic accountability.

Moving Toward Racial Justice

Recognizing continued disparities in our community is essential for targeted, effective advocacy and meaningful policy change. As a society, and here in Santa Cruz County, we must continue to work towards reforms, such as eliminating racial profiling, reducing sentencing disparities, expanding alternatives to incarceration, and promoting community-based efforts aimed at addressing disparities upstream to provide meaningful opportunities for education, engagement, and rehabilitation.

Resources for Further Learning

- [The New Jim Crow](#) by Michelle Alexander
- [Are Prisons Obsolete?](#) by Angela Y. Davis
- Reports from the [California Department of Justice](#) and [Public Policy Institute of California](#)

What Now?

At the Office of the Public Defender, we believe that [advancing diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging](#) are critical to our mission to elevate public defense, one client at a time. We understand that unjust systems harm our clients and community. Challenging these systems requires us to examine our own implicit biases and adopt model practices for mitigating harm, elevating voices that have been muted by prejudice, classism, or racism, and moving forward together in strength. **We stand for racial equality, social change, and equal justice for all.**

As we honor Juneteenth, we are mindful that love, courage and hope are more powerful than hate, cowardice, and fear. We believe that together we can build a community grounded in justice, equity, and inclusion and a future rooted in freedom, fairness, and dignity. We are mindful that our work demands that we constantly speak truth to power, pointing out how the criminal legal system has persistently burdened people of color, including Black individuals, leading to intergenerational incarceration, trauma, and poverty. Join us in this ongoing struggle to achieve true abolition, emancipation, and justice.