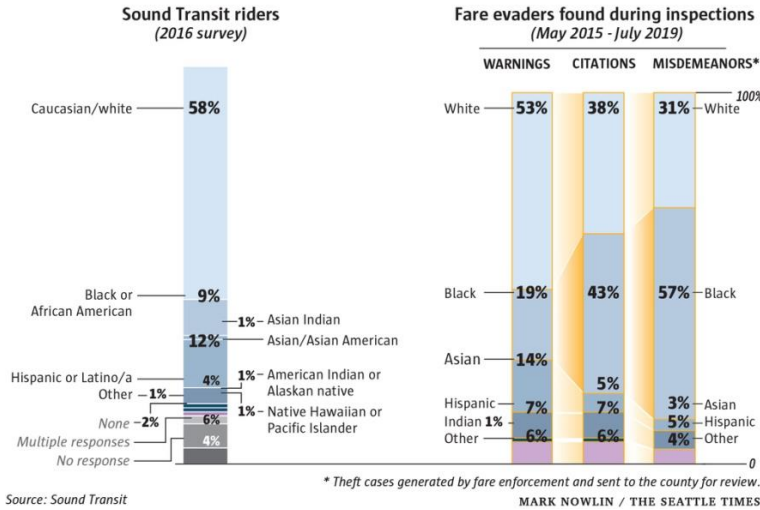


# Racial Disparities in King County Public Transit Fare Enforcement

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## Demographics of Sound Transit's fare enforcement

Sound Transit says its fare enforcement system is designed to reduce bias, but agency data shows that black riders are disproportionately warned, cited or criminally charged for fare evasion. And the disparity grows as the punishment gets more severe.

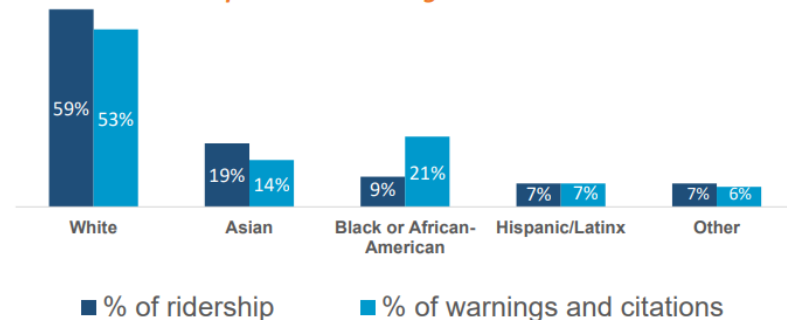


Recent rider surveys and fare enforcement data have revealed significant racial disparities in Sound Transit fare enforcement and punishment. Black riders are the most impacted by such disparities. [9% of people who ride the light rail and Sounder commuter trains are black, but 22% of riders caught by fare enforcement in the last four](#)

[years were black.](#) Additionally, black riders receive more severe punishments than other racial groups. As the punishment increases in severity from warnings to citations to misdemeanors, the extent of overrepresentation of black riders also increases. In the enforcement system, first-time fare evaders receive a warning, while repeat violators receive a \$124 ticket, a second ticket, and then a misdemeanor charge for consecutive violations within a year of the first violation. Black riders made up 19% of individuals who received warnings, 42% of individuals who received citations, and 57% of

## Warning and citation demographics

2018-2019 ridership vs 2018 warnings and citations



individuals criminally charged for misdemeanor theft.

Sound Transit officials are aware of these disparities, but do not have a solution or explanation yet. Fare enforcement officers are [trained to enter Sound Transit trains from both ends](#) and work their way towards the center as they check every passenger for proof of payment. This method was designed to be unbiased, but as the data has shown, it still results in disproportionate punishment. Sound Transit's data does not indicate why people don't pay. It is likely that most people who evade fares simply cannot afford to pay, but critics question whether public transit systems should punish people who cannot afford to ride. Low income riders can qualify for discounted passes in a discount program called ORCA Lift, and instead of paying fines, they can do community service. However, King County Metro survey data shows that [even though half of surveyed individuals qualify, they do not use the discount program](#), perhaps due to lack of awareness.

Sound Transit has identified a few potential solutions to the disparities in fare enforcement. These include increasing the number of warnings (as opposed to quickly moving forward to citations and misdemeanor charges), reducing the amount of fines, resolving fines for individuals in ORCA Lift, and updating fare enforcement officer training modules to focus on more on anti-bias training. Another potential solution was to forego inspections during severe weather, [the first day of school](#), and other special circumstances. Although some community members advocate for abolishing fare enforcement in its entirety, Sound Transit officials are reluctant as they estimate losing \$1.9 million to fare evasion each year and are concerned about the impact on revenue. However, they also spend \$1.4 million



each year on fare enforcement. It costs about \$6 to check one passenger, so it is unclear why Sound Transit clings to this system. It is time for reform, and as King County Councilmember and Sound Transit Board member Claudia Balducci says, “doing fare enforcement right doesn’t mean forgoing a whole bunch of revenue. If the people we’re not collecting from can’t afford to pay, they were never going to pay.”