**Outline – Illustration Paper**

**Working Title:** The Impacts of Incomplete Race/Ethnicity in Administrative Sentencing Data: An Illustration and Call to Action

**The “Story”**

* Administrative data are often used to answer questions relating to criminal justice and racial/ethnic fairness—particularly with increased calls for racial/ethnic impact statements to accompany policy change.
* Missingness on key variables is common in administrative data, particularly when it comes to race and ethnicity. The field of criminology has a documented history of the suboptimal treatment of missing data (cite our conceptual paper). This has implications for how accurately we can measure racial/ethnic impacts.
* Past research shows inconsistent findings of “race/ethnicity effects” across the criminal legal system. A salient example is in sentencing research, in which Black (and to some degree, Latino) defendants tend to experience harsher outcomes on average at each step of the court process: from pretrial detention to plea negotiation, and sentencing.
  + These effects are of course conditioned by court contexts and case circumstances, which only complicates the central question: to what degree are race and ethnicity associated with court outcomes, all else equal?
  + Criminological scholars have attempted to address this question for 50+ years, reaching the unsatisfying answer that race and ethnicity *do* appear to be associated with court outcomes, but that this is not *always* the case, not *always* in the anticipated direction (i.e., with non-White defendants receiving harsher outcomes than their White counterparts), and may fluctuate given the era, historical and sociopolitical contexts of the court, and other case-level extralegal characteristics of the defendants (e.g., age, gender, socioeconomic status). We argue that these effects may also fluctuate depending on the degree and treatment of missing racial/ethnic data.
* Scholars have demonstrated a renewed interest in examining “race/ethnicity effects” in sentencing, recently questioning to what degree these effects still exist, their magnitude, and how their magnitude may have changed over time (Light, 2022). It is difficult (and perhaps irresponsible) to address these questions with confidence while ignoring the treatment of missing data.
* In a field in which questions of racial/ethnic impact and equity abound, it is problematic that: 1) race/ethnicity data are often missing; 2) missing data often go unaddressed; or 3) they may be addressed inconsistently between studies and with little regard for methodological best practices. Using ten years of data (2010 – 2019) from a popular sentencing data source (Pennsylvania Commission on Sentencing), we illustrate how varying patterns and rates of data missingness impact the “race/ethnicity effect” in sentencing. We then consider the implications for criminological research and for the criminal justice field more broadly.